

Lover's Times
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Chapter 1

Long, long, single-sided love.

When he returned from his bath, he looked around the ends of the hallways and checked. The only public phone on the dorm was void of people. Hirose Akihiro roughly rubbed at his wet hair with a bath towel and hurriedly returned to his room. Grabbing his phone card in one hand, he ran to the phone.

Standing in front of the phone, he slowly breathed in and out to control his quickened breath. His eyeglasses fell all the way to the end of his nose and blurred his eyesight, so he took it off and placed it on top of the phone.

There was a conference room towards left corner of the room. An ancient and giant clock started to chime nine times, as if it had been waiting for him.

The phone's ringtone echoed in his ears, almost painfully. The ends of his fingers throbbed with pumped blood, as if his heart was located there.

He knew that he was nervous, so he was worried about sounding too excited or something. The ring ended after seven times, and he heard clicking of the phone connecting.

☎Yes, this is Arita.☎

☎Is that you, Mr. Arita? I'm Hirose. Uh...☎

☎However, I am away from home at the moment. Please leave...☎

The mechanical voice echoed, ignoring Hirose's voice. Strength went out of his shoulders. As he numbly heard the answering machine, he shifted the phone in his hand.

☎Hello Mr. Arita, this is Hirose. I apologize for contacting you so late. It has already been over a month since I came here, but...☎

☎Hirose?☎

The voice suddenly flew into his ears. He was so surprised that he dropped the receiver.

☎Hirose, right? Hey.☎

He wrapped his hands around the receiver and fumbled, pressing it against his ears.

☎How are you. I thought you weren't home.☎

“I just came back. The phone started to ring when I was unlocking the door, so it surprised me.”

When he closed his eyes, just doing so made Arita's face surface within his eyelids. Arita wasn't an attention-grabber, but he could recall even details like his slightly over-grown bangs and thin sides of the lips. He tightly pressed the receiver against his ears. It felt like a lie that they were several hundred miles apart. His voice sounded so close.

“I told you to call me right away once you get there, but it’s already May. You’re so heartless.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, you must have been so busy that you didn’t have time to call anyway, but still.”

He couldn’t say anything to the person on the other side of the receiver. The main branch’s work was definitely incomparable to the work he did back at Asahina Branch. It was complicated and involved so many branches of different tasks. Not to mention he didn’t know how to take short-cuts and worked slowly, so it took him twice, three times as long as others to finish his task.

Not to mention April was when the new workers arrived. He knew the Arita must have been busy with training and education, so he couldn’t call up Arita and waste his time.

He listed several reasons in his mind, but in the end, it was all just an excuse. If he wanted to, he could have contacted him any time. He could have pressed the dial while doing paper work or during his resting period. It wasn’t like they were going to talk for hours; few minutes would have sufficed. However, he couldn’t do that.

If he would be blunt about it... He was waiting for himself to wake up from the aftermath of his feelings.

“How is it there? Is the work hard?”

“A lot of the system is different from our company, so I can’t even use my own computer properly right now.... So I just feel like a guest.”

His laughter softly rang. Just thinking about Arita smiling at him made his heart ache warmly.

“Now is the only time that you’ll think of yourself as a guest. Once they find out that you’re pretty good, they’ll work you to the ground until your bones turn into dust.”

“Really?”

“At first, you’ll think they’re just too much.”

He wanted to see his face. He wanted to fly to Asahina right this second, and talk to him face to face. He knew that realistically speaking, it was impossible, and Arita refused to acknowledge his feelings that made him desire to do something like that. So he didn’t say anything. He couldn’t say anything.

Arita's lips touched his just once. It became soft from becoming heated up... It happened a month ago, but just thinking about it made his back spine tremble.

"Hirose, did something happen?"

"No... Is everyone there doing good?"

The hallway suddenly became noisy, so he couldn't hear the phone. He closed his left ear, but the noise broke through his hand and entered his ear.

"If you look at him, you'll seriously get pissed off. I don't know what kind of branch office he was leeching off of, but he's no good here. He's totally useless."

The voice sounded familiar, and it was about horrible things. The two didn't notice Hirose and continued to talk loudly enough for the hallway to echo with their voices.

"The only good thing about him is that he's tall as shit, but I'm partnered up with such a dumb guy. I can't believe I have the rotten luck to work with him for the next one year."

"Hey..."

Out of two, Yamakami () noticed Hirose and jabbed the side of the guy standing next to him. The man who turned his head to look at him was Kawakami Yutaka (). Kawakami and Hirose were the same age, and they were supposed to team up and work together for this year. There was no doubt that he was the idiot that Kawakami didn't want to work together with.

When Kawakami realized that it was Hirose, he tsked and babbled in loud voice, as if he wanted to be heard.

"What a long phone conversation you are having, Hirose. This is a dormitory. We only have one phone, so if you're hogging it, no one else can use it. How about thinking about other people's inconvenience once in a while?"

He desperately closed the mouthpiece of his receiver, but it was too late.

"I must have caused you trouble for using the phone for too long at the dorm. I'm sorry for not thinking about that. Did you have something specific that you wanted to talk to me about?"

It sounded like Kawakami's voice definitely reached Arita's ears.

"No, I didn't have anything in particular that I wanted to discuss with you."

"Then I'm going to hang up, so come visit when you have the time. Good night."

"Yes..."

The phone got hung up with a click. His conversation ended in just few minutes. The awkward ending and anger boiled up in his stomach, and came back up through his intestines.

He had been talking to Arita for just a short while. He felt what Kawakami spat at him was ridiculous.

“Did we make you hang up? Sorry.”

Yamakami scratched his head, embarrassed. Kawakami yelled, as if cutting him off.

“Don’t be concerned with a jerk like that. He should know at least a little when he’s causing problems for other people.”

Thus spitting out everything that was on his mind, Kawakami stalked up to his room.

“He’s not a bad guy, but he’s hot tempered and has rough way of speaking, so...”

Yamakami muttered, as if to himself.

“It’s okay. I’m not minding him.”

He said while forcing himself to smile, but when Yamakami left and everyone else left around the phone, he suddenly felt emptiness surrounding his entire body. He regretted, thinking that he shouldn’t have called if it was going to turn out this way.

Kawakami was cheerful, energetic, and friendly. Anything he thought of, it came out straight through his mouth. Hirose was a careful man who checked two, three, even four times, whether it was for work or making friends. Their personalities were as different as water and oil.

Kawakami easily found short-cuts and did every work with ease, so he who took long time for anything and everything was completely hated by Kawakami.

There were some people like Arita, his Asahina branch’s senior worker, who would laugh and forgive him, saying “It can’t be helped.” But there are also people who wouldn’t just forgive him with that.

Feeling depressed, he held the phone card that lost almost no money and returned to his room.

He was pretty diligent, and kept his surroundings pretty clean. However, lately he had been busy out of his mind, so he didn’t even put his blanket away this morning. He twisted and turned on top of his already spread out sheets, but inside his eyelids, Kawakami’s face circled around.

He tried to think of something that would cheer him up at least a little, and the first thing that came up was the face of his Asahina branch’s senior, Arita Manabu.

This morning, Hirose was called to the main branch office located in the city for one year, for training purposes. It was aimed towards workers who were in the middle of their career. Hirose’s age, which was twenty eight, was just right, too.

To come to the main office and to learn the flow of work with his own body was a huge advantage to his career from now on. It was something that should have made him hop around with happiness, but to be honest, Hirose wasn’t pleased at all. He didn’t care if he remained as lower-

ladder worker for rest of his life. He wanted to remain at the branch office.

The reason? Because the person he loved was there. He didn't want to be away from that person. If he mentioned that to others, they might laugh at him, saying "it's only a year." However, that one year felt hopelessly long.

He was able to stay by his beloved's side, and he was allowed to hang out with him, but only until that person found a lover. While they were apart like this, there was no guarantee that Arita wouldn't fall in love with someone else or someone else would fall in love with him. He didn't have that much time left. The thought made him anxious, but there was nothing he could do.

If only the person he loved had been a woman, he might have had even a thread of hope. Someday, she might look back at him. He might wait until rest of his life, holding that small hope in his heart. However, if the opponent was a man, it was all useless. Even if he waited for eternity, an opportunity will not be offered to him.

“Mr. Arita.”

Just how many times was he repeating to himself the name of his senior who was older than him by two years? If he could make Arita look back at him just by repeating his name, he would repeat it even several thousand, no a million times.

Arita was a sweet person. He learned most of his work from Arita. He was considerate towards him until the end, even though he was so slow. He never got tired of him, or gave up on him. He was feeling low, thinking he was dragging Arita down with him, but Arita took care so that he would not feel this way.

Throughout junior high, senior high, and college, it was Hirose's short-coming that he was "slow, dull, and didn't know how to take short-cuts." No matter how close a friend was, they did not have spare time to take care of adult man who was as old as he was.

He was scared that he would not be able to handle the work even if he got a job. He entered the job field and the first person he had met was Arita.

The newbie couldn't even differentiate between left and right, but Arita whole-heartedly took care of him and taught him things he did not know, even if he had to teach him the same thing over and over again. He never acted bothered, nor annoyed with questions.

He thought that he wanted to become a person like Arita. So when he got an underclassmen of his own, he wanted to persistently help them out until the end, without being bothered by them.

Early in his life, he had people around him who had good personality, so they were not bad people, but they were cold to him. He resolved to himself that he would not become like that.

He wasn't sure himself when he realized that his admiration of Arita was actually a romantic feeling. In his third year, he was transferred to another branch of their company. Hirose looked for a senior worker or co-worker who was like Arita, but he failed to find anyone like that.

In his sixth year of working, he finally managed to come back to the Asahina Branch. He went

around, saying hello to his senior workers, and he ran into Arita again. It had been three years. When he recognized him and bowed his head to him, Arita softly smiled.

“I’m happy to work together with you again.”

It was only meant to be a nice, social thing to say, but he was so happy that tips of his fingers trembled. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from Arita’s back, who was called away by the team manager.

“Maybe this is love.”

He was slow, so he finally understood this situation after six years have passed.

Perhaps it would’ve been better if he never realized that it was love. No matter how much he thought about it, there was nothing he could do. However, he couldn’t stop himself from keep looking at Arita who did not look back at him, and he couldn’t deny his feelings, either.

At first, he had absolutely no intention to confess to him. That day, they were returning from company dinner and were walking and making small talks, just two of them. It made him so happy, but the profile who faced forward and refused to look at him made him long for him so much. He continued to pray to the turned back, “please look back at me.” He ended up spilling the words, I love you. He had no idea that he would regret this so, so many times, wishing that he had never said anything.

He would’ve been a moron if he had not expected it, but after he had confessed, Arita harshly refused him. Arita was a completely normal man, and he definitely did not welcome confession from another man. He was told that his gaze was disgusting, and he was ignored. He grew to hate himself, thinking that he was a nasty, perverted man. However...

Arita was Arita, after all. He tried to ignore him, but in the end, he couldn’t completely do so. He seemed fed up with his stupid underclassman, but while bitterly smiling, he had reached out to him. They drove around together, and took photographs. Arita, who became closer to him before, was by his side. Listening to his words, he would hug his knees and laugh. ...He was so happy that he felt faint.

Such dream-like happiness was shortly cut off after only few months, because of his call to the main office. At the branch office’s Goodbye Party, he still had regrets about Arita. Since he was totally wasted, as if leaning on his kindness, he said that he wanted to kiss him.

It was a foolhardy wish. He had been refused. Of course. But when he said he wanted it for the second time, he had not been refused. At first, he was shaking so much. However, his desire didn’t allow him to simply end with their lips touching.

He changed the angle again and again, pressing their lips together. By the time his tongue touched Arita’s, it was like a total dream. He greedily clung onto him, and then his head cooled and he realized his behavior and hurriedly pulled away. He was like a beast that changes expression and jumps at the food offered to it. His own slyness made him so embarrassed that he couldn’t look Arita in the face.

He had received that first and last kiss as a so-called goodbye gift. He felt guilty and uncomfortable about it, so he couldn't call him. However, when he heard Arita's voice, he realized that he was hungry for that voice more than anything else. How come he couldn't stay by his side? He became so anxious that it felt like his insides were burning up. He wanted to stay with him, and listen to him talk, and gaze at his smiling face...

He knew only too well that it was a one-sided affair. No matter how he thought about Arita, Arita had absolutely no interest in that way. He had only been bearing with him as an upperclassman. He knew that. But even that was more than enough, so...

☒I want to go back as soon as possible.☒

He wanted to meet Arita. It had been a month and a half since he came to the city. Until the one year session ended, over ten months still remained.

Since his work progress was so slow, even when he was at the branch office, he had a lot of overtime work to do. It was the same at the main office. The only good thing was that he learned how to utilize the computer faster than others.

He thought he was learning work for one branch of work, but it seemed that there were a lot of other work circulating around, too. Just when he thought his own work would be done on time, he would be given another work and Hirose would have to be part of the overtime team.

Kawakami rushed through his work skillfully and managed to push his extra work to others, and went back home right on time. He was endlessly jealous of him.

Today, also, after noon had passed, his work did not progress even half way according to his schedule, so Hirose got himself prepared to work overtime. Sighing, he stood up and stuck his wallet in his back pocket. He left the company building to have a late lunch.

There was a cheap and delicious cafeteria within the main company building. However, for his working mother, his grandmother had cooked and thanks to that, Hirose couldn't continue to eat meals that centered around fattening food like Chinese take-outs and hamburgers. He had noted a store nearby which was on the expensive side, but had a menu that centered on traditional Japanese meals.

When it was mid May, the difference between light and darkness was dramatic. When he stepped out of the office building, he suddenly saw dark flashes so he closed his eyes instinctively.

When he entered the narrow alleyway that headed south from the main road, he saw a woman crouched into a ball, leaning against the shadowed building walls.

A man who was hurriedly power walking right behind him crashed into Hirose who had suddenly stopped walking, and he glared at him and tsked, then forged ahead.

He softly asked her. Even though he spoke to her, she didn't lift her head. She was hugging her knees and crouched to a sitting position, and her fingers looked really pale. Ends of her shoulders were also shaking, as if she were cold. He grew worried and shook her shoulder strongly. She

finally lifted her head.

“Are you okay?”

He loudly spoke next to her ear. As if biting down on her red lips, she finally spoke.

“...My strength suddenly went out ...”

It looked difficult for her to even talk.

“...I was... walking outside... And then suddenly my vision blurred...”

“Is this your first time experiencing this symptom?”

She nodded. Hirose hurriedly ran to the main street and bought a can of juice from the vending machine. She shook her head, showing she didn’t want to drink it, but he forced her lips against the juice.

Even though she refused to drink it, once her lips touched it, she gulped huge gulps as if she had been stranded at the desert.

“Do you feel better now?”

“...a bit”

“Were you on your way home? Or were you in middle of working?”

“I’m going back to my company...”

“Should I take you there?”

She weakly shook her head.

“I’m fine by myself.”

She wobbled to her feet without leaning on him. She took one step and lost her balance, and collapsed against Hirose’s chest. Surprised, he held her tightly. The sweet fragrance from her hair brushed past his nose.

“I’m sorry...”

Clinging to his chest, her face became bright red and she closed her eyes. He didn’t realize it until he got close to her and saw her face closely, but she was quite a beautiful woman.

“I’m on my way back, too, so I’ll take you there. Where is....”

“It’s the M Company.”

Hirose looked at her face again. She was so pretty that she was unforgettable once you saw her,

but even though he dug to the bottom of his memory, he couldn't recall her.

☞What a coincidence. I work at the same company. That's really great.☞

As if being lead by the smiling Hirose, the beauty also smiled a little.

After the closing time of 5 PM, his co-workers started to leave one by one. Hirose continued to enter data, face to face with the computer monitor.

He started to feel really hungry, so his hands stopped. Come to think of it, he was busy nursing that lady from the same company during his lunch hours, so he didn't have time to eat outside. He had convenience store's bread as his lunch.

Thinking about filling his empty stomach with can coffee, he stood up and for the first time realized that there was a commotion near the entrance.

☞He's a tall gentleman, with glasses.☞

The voice brushed past his ears. Surrounded by people, the morning's beautiful lady peeked out. Their eyes met. She smiled and came to Hirose, who was pausing at the entryway.

Softly curling, silken hair slightly passed her shoulders and wrapped around her tiny face. Her eyes were huge. Her slender arms and legs were shockingly white, so her elegantly standing pose made her look like a Japanese doll. She deeply bowed her head to Hirose.

☞Thank you so much for this morning.☞

☞Were you okay afterwards?☞

The pretty girl grinned, like a flower blossoming.

☞I slept at the nurse's office for 2 hours after that, and then I was completely energized.☞

☞I'm so glad to hear that it wasn't a serious illness.☞

☞Yes. Um... Are you leaving now?☞ She asked, so he shook his head.

☞I still have some work left.☞

The beauty lowered her head, as if giving up.

☞I was thinking about repaying your kindness of this morning...☞

☞Oh no, don't worry about that.☞

Once again, she thanked him, and left the room. Men made a fence around Hirose without even waiting for the door to close behind her.

What's your relation with Isogai Mariko ()?!

They asked for details, so when he summarized what happened in the morning, the guys finally looked like they understood the situation.

Even so, not bad at all. There are tons of guys who'd like to go out with Isogai Mariko, but she has such tough defenses.

If I knew this was going to happen, I would've eaten outside, too.

The men who crowded around Hirose seemed disheartened by his lack of reaction. Just like when they gathered around him, it didn't take them even 5 minutes before they all dispersed without a trace.

When he became alone and it became quiet, Hirose breathed out heavily. Question after question. He felt in his heart the power of a gorgeous woman. Isogai Mariko was definitely a drop-dead beauty that would attract anyone at first sight.But that's all she was.

Just because one was beautiful and loveable, it didn't mean that she became love interest right away. That was him right now, for example. Adjectives like adorable and pretty didn't match Arita at all, even though the word 'kind' suited him perfectly.

Must be feeling pretty good about yourself.

Angry words poured over him. He broke out of his thoughts and looked around him. His eyes met with Kawakami's sharp gaze. He couldn't understand Kawakami's anger. Kawakami turned to the side violently. It was a bit later that he finally realized the meaning of his gaze.

Chapter 2

Right after work he came back to the dorm, and had a supper and took a bath. When he was done, it was already past 11. For a Friday, he had actually gotten home earlier than usual. It was towards end of May, and he was finally getting used to the work. This weekend he finally had two days completely off, where he didn't have to do any weekend work.

He had planned on moving a bit and driving all the way to the suburbs tomorrow. He had taken his car out so few times that he can count the times on his fingers since he came here. However, she needed her engines run once in a while, too.

He found his camera bag inside his closet and took out his camera. He took off the lens and shined it against the fluorescent light. He had kept it in a place that easily got damp, so if he didn't take care, it might start to grow fungus...

He had several cameras, but this was the only one that he had brought with him. It was an old model, but he had used it for few years, so he was attached to it. He had often went on one-day car trip with Arita, bringing this camera with him.

It looks awesome. I'd like something like this.

Arita seemed to like Hirose's camera. Holding the camera in his hands, he had repeated the above sentence many times.

Someone knocked at his door, so Hirose placed the camera lens on top of its lens cloth. Wondering who it was, he opened the door. There was Kawakami standing like a statue. He seemed to have taken a bath, just like Hirose, since his hair was wet.

“What is it?”

Even while asking that, he couldn't erase the sinking feeling. Kawakami couldn't be said to have a pleased expression on his face. He glanced sideways at Hirose, standing on tip-toes to steal glances at Hirose's room over his shoulders.

“I need to talk to you... I'll come in.”

Shoving Hirose's shoulder aside, he boldly stepped into his room. Kawakami glanced at the huge camera lens on top of the table, and then he carelessly placed it to the side and plopped down. He was at least 10 centimeters smaller than him and their muscle mass was about the same, but for some reason, he felt like Kawakami seemed taller than him.

“Tell me your true feelings.”

While he was rushing to find something to drink inside the refrigerator, Kawakami spoke out to him from the back.

“What?”

When he handed a canned coffee to Kawakami, without even politely refusing, he opened it up.

“I'm talking about Isogai Mariko.”

Hirose tilted his head in confusion at the sudden mention of the name “Isogai.” He thought Kawakami had definitely come to talk to him about work. He had assumed that he was going to talk about something along the lines of having requested a change of partner since he was so slow, and that the team manager had accepted such a request.

“Do you like her?”

It felt weird to make a serious expression, so Hirose forced himself to smile. But he thought right away that it would've been better if he hadn't smiled. Kawakami's frowning expression became even more aggressive.

“I've never even thought about whether I like her or not.”

He answered honestly. He felt like he heard the creaking sounds of Kawakami grinding his molars.

“Don't give me a bullshit. You guys ate out, just two of you. You have feelings for Isogai, don't you? Tell me the truth!”

Kawakami seemed unable to accept Hirose's answer, and he aggressively attacked him, as if he would tear him apart.

“Even if you say we had dinner together, it was by coincidence, since we happened to meet up after work...”

Kawakami slammed down on the table with all his strength. Hirose's eyes opened widely, startled at the loud noise. The shock caused the camera lens to tilt to the side, and then roll around on top of the tatami (straw mat).

“COINCIDENCE? Are you kidding me? You always come back home around 8, 9-ish, and how many people would be working until those hours? Isogai had been waiting for you.”

Picking up his lens, he held it in his hands. He slowly opened his lips.

“...last time, when she couldn't move because of anemia, I brought her back to the company. Maybe she kept that in her mind. She told me that she wouldn't feel comfortable if she didn't repay me for that time.”

“Seriously, I had enough of you shitting around with me.”

He spoke quietly, but menacingly. That made him more scared than ever, so he couldn't say anything. Glancing at Hirose who had closed his mouth, Kawakami violently pronounced each word, word by word.

“Isogai is attracted to you. So how about it? You happy?”

Kawakami laughed faintly.

“All Isogai wants to talk about is you. I told her several times to forget about you, but she wouldn't listen to me.”

His obvious, provocative way of speaking. His venomous words that felt like it would freeze him. Not trying to be overwhelmed by his hostility, Hirose tightly grabbed ends of his fingers.

“If you have no intention of starting anything with her, why did you follow along to Isogai's invitation? Don't you feel sorry for her, giving her false hopes? Or are you going to have gentleman-like expression on your face while thinking, I will not refuse a woman who comes onto me? Are you planning to play around with her and sleeping around?”

He had no idea that she had feelings for him. He thought she was just a friendly girl, and he thought she was so nice to him because he had helped her before. It wasn't a lie. He wasn't even sure of his own “love” for such a long time. He didn't have interest nor the sharp wits to notice someone else's feelings.

“I love Isogai. I know she doesn't care for me at all, but I love her anyway. I can't stop my feelings. She was called away to the main office this time around, so I pestered the higher-ups so that I can tag along here, too. She says I don't have to, but I bring her home every single day. But whether it

be a dinner or to go somewhere fun, if it's me, Isogai had never said yes.

Hirose was oppressed with Kawakami's passionate outburst, and felt light-headed at the love relationship that was being organized in his head. It seemed Kawakami had finished speaking all he wanted to for now, since he took a swig at the coffee can in his hand.

Even if you want to go out with Isogai, as long as you're serious about it, I'm fine. I'll give up, saying there's nothing else I could do. But you have beef with me and if you are using Isogai as a sacrifice to take out your anger on me, I won't forgive you. If you're not interested, keep your hands off of her. You're pissing me off.

Even if he says, "keep your hands off," Hirose has never hit on Isogai.

Even so, why would Isogai fall for someone like you? Girls are difficult to understand.

He has been freely insulted, and Hirose was so outraged that towards middle of their conversation, he had been staring at the floor so that he wouldn't have to look at Kawakami's face. The trembling of his finger tips have stopped at certain point, too. After certain level of anger, he was so furious that this seemed like a ridiculous thing that he can laugh at. Beyond that, Hirose felt like his heart was freezing up.

No matter how he was judged and was complimented, he had a complex that he couldn't deny. So he over-reacted to things like that.

For example, this condescending behavior that insulted him right at his face.

Kawakami was smiling, satisfied since he remained silent. He's saying that he's doing this because he loves Isogai and he wants to protect her, but Hirose felt that his pride simply didn't allow his favorite object to be taken away by the man that he had been looking down on.

Hirose quietly breathed in and out few times. If he opened his mouth without being careful, he thought he might end up saying ridiculous things. Right now Kawakami had totally lost his temper, so no matter what he says, he wouldn't listen to him. There was no point in arguing back to him.

He also couldn't say that Kawakami's words were 100% wrong. He was also at fault for not being more aware of his surroundings and not realizing that this was going on. However... Hirose was beyond furious at Kawakami, who accused him of purposely hitting on Isogai after figuring out that Kawakami had a crush on her. He had just assumed things and had strongly insulted and blamed him.

Engrave my words into your head. From now on, if you mess around with Isogai without a good reason, I'll never forgive you.

It was just one-sided rant. As soon as he was done, Kawakami stood up. There was a cautious knocking on the door.

Mr. Hirose.

It was voice of the dorm manager.

☒There is a phone call to the manager's room. He's called Mr. Arita, from the Asahina Branch. Will you come and take it?☒

☒Oh! I'll come right this second.☒

At the mention of Arita's name, Hirose instinctively stood up. He hurriedly ran towards the door. He didn't even realize that his shoulders brushed against Kawakami's nose.

☒Hold on there.☒

When his right arm was grabbed and twisted, so he had to stop, Hirose seriously thought that Kawakami's presence was an annoyance.

☒You won't just leave without even saying sorry after you've hit the end of someone else's nose, are you?☒

Hirose thought it was ridiculous how he was picking on him for every single freaking thing, so he thought about shaking him off and leaving. However, their relationship was already so horrible that he didn't want to worsen it, so he stopped himself from shoving Kawakami aside and apologized.

☒I was in a rush... Sorry.☒

☒Seriously, do you have a screw or two loose?☒

Hopelessly dumb piece of shit, Kawakami's eyes told him.

☒I'm really sorry. So... ☒

☒Fine, fine, okay. Hurry and go.☒

Kawakami let go, as if tossing him aside. He was suddenly pushed away, so Hirose lost his balance and hit his back against the door.

☒Oh, my bad, man.☒

Half-hearted behavior. Words. Hirose felt his anger, which had been cooling down, immediately shooting up again to its full capacity.

☒Kawakami.☒

☒What? Hurry and leave.☒

The man twisted the ends of his lips, smirking at him. Hirose couldn't stop his words that rushed out.

☒I had no idea that you had a crush on Ms. Isogai, nor that Ms. Isogai liked me.☒

☒What is it this time? You want to play the innocent card?☒

With a confused expression, Kawakami tightly closed his mouth.

“I don't like types like Ms. Isogai to the point of wanting to take her away from you, who would be so mad over it. I hate messy situations, so had I known that you liked her, I wouldn't even have talked to her. How about thinking things through? Do you think I even pay attention to your personal life? I'm already so dense; you think I'll know about your love life?”

“What are you trying to say?”

Kawakami pouted.

“I don't know anything, and yet you grabbed me and got all upset, yelling about keeping my hands off of Ms. Isogai and how I'm insulting you. You're on a rampage just by assumptions and you're totally self-absorbed. Aren't you ashamed of how rude you're being?”

Kawakami brightly blushed.

“Don't talk nonsense!” He shouted. Hirose glared down at Kawakami from above.

“YOU cut it out. You're picking on me just by guessing. I'm not saying anything and I don't talk back, so it must've been convenient for you to yell at me. But your anger has no basis.”

He knows how he looks right now as he's staring at Kawakami. Expression face. Cold eyes. At the mouse's counter-attack, Kawakami couldn't even say one word to defend himself, and was only able to glare back at Hirose.

“You only care about yourself. You don't care about other people's feelings at all.”

He ignored Kawakami, who tried to say something, and ran towards the telephone at the manager's room.

Even after he had grabbed the receiver, the extreme fury just now felt like it was filling up his head, so he couldn't talk for few seconds.

“... Hello.”

“Hirose?”

His cold, apathetic voice that he had spat out at Kawakami just now rang in his ears. He was already regretting how he had shoved Kawakami to the corner without hesitation. He felt so terrible that even Arita's voice failed to reach his eardrums properly.

“I know it's sudden, but are you available this Friday night?”

“Friday?” He answered, as if echoing him.

“I have a business trip to the main branch. It's been a long time, so I thought we'd grab some dinner together. Is that okay?”

☐...Yes, I understood.☐

He didn't even realize that the person on the other side of the phone had remained silent. He was just numbly clutching the phone.

☐...I don't want to force you or anything. You must be busy. Do you want to meet up next time maybe?☐

☐It's okay. My work is done, so let's meet. Please.☐ He hurriedly replied. He heard Arita's sigh, mixed with a smile.

☐You have no energy. You tired?☐

☐...This and that.☐

☐Work?☐

☐And other things. A little.☐

Pressing the receiver against his right ear, he slid to a seat next to the phone. He knew that this was the manager's phone, so he shouldn't keep the conversation long. However, if the manager asked him to hang up the phone right now, he thought he'd pull out the cord, grab the phone and run off with it. That's how much he had been longing for this voice.

The manager glanced at Hirose, and then he gave off a small yawn. Saying that he's going to buy a pack of cigarettes, he left the room.

☐If it's not work, then your relations with other people?☐

☐Well, something like that.☐

I have a mean co-worker who speaks rudely...

☐Your boss giving you a hard time?☐

☐I'm bad at working, so. My work pace is so slow that it's putting everyone on an edge....☐

There aren't many who would patiently wait for me to be done like you, Mr. Arita.

☐Don't worry too much about it. You know, your slow work pace is just a cute side that you have.☐

☐Cute side?☐

It wasn't a description that he heard too often.

☐A tall and hot guy who works quickly, too? Everyone will just die of jealousy. That'll be a handicap, too.☐

Hirose burst out laughing without thinking about it. He felt corners of his lips relaxing because of the laughter, and suddenly realized that lately he hadn't been laughing at all.

☞Wow. But even if you praise me like that, I'm not going to give you anything in return.☞

☞As long as you've laughed, that's enough.☞

He can hear Arita's voice, who talked as if he was muttering to himself.

☞If it's a work-related problem, I can give you an advice, too.☞

☞My work is.... not too bad. I've just managed to memorize the C Class Customer List.☞

☞Huh?!☞

Short exclamation.

☞C Class? That thing must have.... nearly 100 companies listed.☞

☞Yes, I think that's about right.☞

Silence took over the phone....

☞Mr. Arita?☞ He asked again, anxious that he couldn't hear anything.

☞Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about how I'm going to promote you to the main branch. Oh boy, it's already this late? You said you can't talk on the phone for a long time, right? So, is Friday OK?☞

☞Yes.☞

☞Then Friday, at 7 PM in front of the main office building lobby. That's OK?☞

☞Sure.☞

☞Don't be so worried about small things. If you need to talk to someone, I'll always be here.☞

☞I'm sorry for making you worried.☞

☞Don't be stupid. It's way better than piling up stress inside your stomach and poking a hole through your liver.☞

☞Sorry.☞

☞You're always just full of apologies. Then good night.☞

☞Sleep tight.☞

The phone got hung up. He only heard the dial tone repeating over and over, but Hirose couldn't bring himself to pull the receiver away from his ear.

After they've had that horrible argument back at his room, his relationship with Kawakami was at its worst. Kawakami noticeably avoided looking at Hirose. He had said some nasty things, so he wanted to apologize. However, even when he reached out to Kawakami, he pointedly ignored him.

They weren't kindergarteners. Even if he apologized, their relationship won't be restored to how it was before. Arguments among grown-ups had bad endings. Adults refused to forgive things that children would easily forgive.

He told Isogai Mariko clearly that he had someone he liked when she asked him out for dinners. He already had someone he was madly in love with. He couldn't give her false hopes.

That morning, again, when he arrived for work, he found a note on his desk. Kawakami divided their task right in half, to the point of being annoying. He thought how he divided their work exactly in halves showed Kawakami's overly honest personality.

It was only few steps from Hirose's desk to Kawakami's desk. The profile blatantly refused to look in his direction. It made him feel uncomfortable, and his hand that held the memo felt unreasonably heavy.

“Which one is this Hirose dude?”

Loud voice. When he looked back, a huge man was asking a woman worker who was just about to come into the office room, holding onto her arm. He followed the finger that pointed at him, and their eyes met.

“You're Hirose?”

The man approached him. He was a sturdy-framed man, who was tall and heavily set. He seemed about 3, 4 years older than Hirose. At the appearance of the man that he had never seen before, Hirose forgot to take a seat and numbly stood.

When he came to stand by his side, the man rudely stared at Hirose, as if he was setting a price on him.

“Man, you look like a nerd.”

He touched his face without thinking. It seemed that the man found this funny, since he shortly burst into laughter. He seemed a bit easier to approach.

“You're going to work outside with me today.”

People nearby started to whisper and mutter amongst themselves.

“I'm sorry, I haven't heard anything about this...”

The man crossed his arms and cocked his head.

☞I've already informed the superiors.☞

When Hirose glanced at his desk, the man stretched out his hands towards Hirose's portion of work documents. He flipped through them, and then he lost interest and tossed it onto his desk.

☞Two of you guys are working as a team without even changing partners once in a while? What an inefficient way to work. Leave your remaining work to your partner guy. Let's go.☞

He seemed to have rushed personality. That's all he said before he left the office.

☞Don't worry about this side of things; you can go. Just leave your things and go.☞

The team manager looked relaxed, his arms crossed over his chest. Hirose hurriedly grabbed his suitcase and suit jacket, and stepped out of the door, feeling like he was being dragged by back of his head. He suddenly heard an angry voice.

☞Move it, slow-poke! What are you waiting for?☞

His arm was grabbed and he was dragged away. He walked as if running, and left the building via the back exit. He was shoved inside passenger seat of the company-sponsored car.

☞Guys who are working here on 1-year limit is usually given outside work little by little, starting on August, but I heard that you've already memorized the entire C List.☞

☞Yes, but...☞

It was a mystery how the man knew about that.

☞Arita said you are very manly, so I was worried that you'll be cooler than I am, but you're not a big deal. You're just hopelessly tall neophyte.☞

The man widely grinned, looking at Hirose's face.

☞My name is Miyata (☞ ☞). I entered the company the same time as Arita, and for a while, we've been partners at work. He stopped contacting me once I moved to the main branch, but recently I've gotten a call from him after not talking to him for such a long time. He said he had an underclassmen who was totally lost, and asked if I could help you out. I thought you'll be nowhere without my help, so I was nice enough to offer you my help at once.☞

☞I'm so sorry for troubling you.☞

Lowering his head, he tightly fisted both hands resting on his legs.

☞Even if you offer to work together, I think I'll just end up causing you problems. Thank you for offering, but it doesn't matter to you if I return to the office, right?☞

Hirose asked with a serious face, but Miyata slapped his back with a thump.

“I was *kidding*. Wow, you're a super modest guy. Arita didn't say anything of the sort. He went out of his way to tell me that we have a really promising worker at our branch right now, so I should fully utilize your potentials. If you've memorized the entire C List, that means you're probably done understanding our sales network as well. My intention is to test you out to see if you're any good. Today, you're going to be super busy. Don't fall down midway.”

Miyata roared with laughter, as if he were having fun.

Chapter 3

As his work sessions outside of the company with Miyata increased, obviously the number of times he came back to the office decreased. There were many times that he never came to the office even once all day; he would just circle around their business partners.

It concerned him that he left all the work to Kawakami, but it was a new experience for him to be involved with the sales. Not only that, but Arita went through the trouble of promoting him, so he didn't want to betray his trust. He did his best following Miyata around.

Even when he came back to the dorm, there was work remaining for organizing the documents he received from their business partners, and recording his work process for the day. Time-wise, it might have been less paperwork for him to remain at the office. However, this way, he was able to do work according to his own pace, without worrying about how others thought about it. He felt less stressed out this way.

On a rare day where he did outside work only for the morning, he came back to the office. He had Chinese food with Miyata for lunch, but his stomach started to hurt. Hirose was drinking some water at the snack room located at the end of the hallway.

He leaned against the sink, as if sitting on it. He was rubbing his chest. That was when he noticed the noisy footsteps.

“You said you were free today.”

Kawakami's voice. Hirose didn't need to do so, but he hurriedly pressed his body against shadow of the refrigerator, as if hiding.

“Sorry, my promise with Tomoko was first.”

The mixed footsteps' other owner was Isogai Mariko. Hirose slowed his breathing. The steps stopped right in front of the snack room, and refused to move.

“It's always like that. Whenever I ask you out, you always say you have something else to do. If you hate me, come out and say so.”

“...I don't hate you. I think you're a good friend, Kawakami. But... I have someone else I love right now.”

“You're talking about Hirose, aren't you?”

When he swallowed, it felt like the noise of saliva passing his throat echoed more loudly than usual. Hirose unconsciously pressed his hand against his mouth, breathing more softly. Isogai didn't say anything. Kawakami seemed to have grown anxious from the silence, since he continued talking.

“He already has someone else he likes. You said he told you that, and cried, remember? Just forget about a guy like that. There is no hope. If it's you, Isogai, you can pick and choose any other guy you want...”

He heard clicking of the high heel that sounded unusually loud.

“If it's you, Kawakami, you can find a much better girl than I am. You're popular among the girls, too.”

“You're the one I love, Isogai. I can't think of any other girl.”

“Why would you like someone like me? I'm a twisted, depressed coward. What could you possibly like about a girl like me?”

“That's not true. You're cute, Isogai.”

“That's only my face!” She sounded like she was screaming.

“I'm serious. I seriously want him. Why would you say bad things about Mr. Hirose, Kawakami?”

“But he is... not very dependable. He's slow at work, and he's dense so he doesn't realize it when he's causing problems for other people. Why would you fall for a guy like that?”

Kawakami's voice gradually lost its strength.

“He helped me out.”

“You mean when you couldn't move because of anemia? No matter whom it had been, if a pretty woman like Isogai looked like she's sick, he'd stop. Anyone would've wanted to give you a hand. It's not like Hirose is someone special.”

He couldn't hear footsteps, nor voices. Only silence heavily walked around.

“So...”

“I had my head lowered.”

Her voice sounded like it would sink.

“Wh-what did you say?”

“I said, I had my head lowered. I felt so horrible that I couldn't remain standing. I was crouching on side of the road, my head bowed down. I was like that for about 30 minutes. At that time, no one

bothered to come talk to me. I knew that footsteps slowed down when they got near me, but they'd walk right by... I wanted to call out for help, but I've lost my voice as well. It was only Mr. Hirose who asked me if I were okay.

That's...

He bought me juice, and stayed by my side until I felt better. Until then, I had my head lowered. He did all that, regardless of my looks.

...

It doesn't surprise me at all that Mr. Hirose would have a girlfriend. Anyone would fall in love with a kind person like him. But... Even when he tells me that he already has someone else in his mind, I just can't give him up.

Her teary voice followed her tiny footsteps that started to move further away. The other footstep didn't move from that spot for a long time.

Hirose pressed his hand against his chest. She had never told him so seriously that she was in love with him. It would be inhuman not to be shaken up by that. But he did have someone else that he loves right now. If only he would return his feelings, he would be willing to give up anything in the world for his sake.

Even if it were me, I would've done the same...

He heard the small muttering. Kawakami clucked his tongue and walked away. He felt like he, Isogai, and Kawakami were all the same. In that they couldn't stop the love that would not be repaid....

On Friday, he didn't want to be late to his dinner with Arita at 7 PM no matter what, so he asked Miyata if he could work at the office. When they worked outside, often they couldn't finish on time because of their business partner's schedule.

It worried him a little that as soon as he got to work, he saw Kawakami being called to the team manager and being yelled at. However, while he was thinking about the coming-up dinner, he forgot all about that.

Today, he was going to meet Arita. Just thinking about it made his fingers dance on the keyboard lightly, and his lips curled up into a smile. It was after a long time had passed that Hirose looked at Kawakami again.

Just like the time he first saw him, Kawakami had his head pathetically lowered in front of the team manager. He started to get concerned about the reason why he would be scolded for such a long time.

Even if they were working individually, two of them were technically a team. If there was a mistake, he was responsible, too. He kept starting at Kawakami's back, which was facing the team manager. He happened to meet his eyes with the woman worker who was sitting next to him.

Mr. Kawakami messed up really badly.

She whispered in a small voice. Hirose had no idea what was going on, so he tilted his head. Her face got closer, as if pushing her body forward, and she lowered her voice.

"Oh, you wouldn't have known, Mr. Hirose, since you were working outside lately. Last week, one chunk of our shipping order disappeared. We got lots of complaint phone calls about how their order never got shipped, and when we looked into it, it turned out to be Mr. Kawakami's fault.... It was only small companies so the orders weren't too large. We managed to ship out products in the storage center, so it wasn't too bad, but one of the companies got really angry. They threatened to cancel our contract, so it was a big problem soothing them. That's what happened so far."

Kawakami was finally freed from the team manager, and sighing heavily, he returned to his desk. He turned to the woman worker that Hirose had been talking with just now, sticking his tongue out so that the team manager wouldn't catch him. He lightly complained.

"Holy cow, I'm not a kindergartener. If I heard it once, even if I were a monkey, I'd get it. If he had the strength to complain, complain and complain for over an hour, he should use that energy for something more productive."

"Mr. Kawakami, you don't seem sorry at all. I answered those angry phone calls, too, you know."

"I'm so~rry, I'll make it up to you by buying you something yummy next time. So forgive me?"

"Oh well, it can't be helped. The deed's already done..."

She seemed half tired of him as she shrunk her shoulders. Kawakami headed to his desk right away. It seemed that he pressed the enter key or switched monitors, because he heard the beeping electronic sound.

"You must have felt good, since I caused problems."

It was definitely a man's voice. Hirose slowly turned his head left to right. Everyone seemed hard at work, and no one was side-glancing at him. But he didn't hear wrong. The snide comment was definitely from Kawakami.

Kawakami's face remained impassive. Following the rhythm with ends of his mouth, he cheerfully tapped away at the keyboard. The office atmosphere felt a little heavy for some reason, so Hirose got up from his chair, intending to rest a little. When he glanced at Kawakami as he left the room, even though the central air was running so that it felt a little chilly, Kawakami's forehead had faint traces of sweat.

When the clock reached five, which was end of work hours, most of the workers finished on time and went home. The main branch did not encourage overtime. Unless there was a special event that was taking place, or towards end of the year, there was no pay for work done after 7 PM. Unusually for him, Hirose managed to finish his work before 5 PM. He had time to kill until he met

up with Arita, but he didn't feel like going outside, so he started to work on Monday's data that he had to enter.

As people at the office grew scarce, he thought he heard Kawakami, who was sitting near the entrance, angrily clucking his tongue often.

The reason for the failure was that there were holes in the list of customers, and he had to look over their finances, too. Kawakami was pulling up their huge customer list one by one, and entering the data by hand.

Most of workers around his age went back home. At that point, Hirose stopped entering the data. He hesitated, but he couldn't just let him be.

☞...If there is anything I can do, I'll help out.☞

Kawakami turned out, and glared at Hirose. He twisted corners of his lips into a smile.

☞I am honored by your gracious offering. But even if you help out, I'll end up being a *gozensama*(☞☞ , someone who hangs out until 12 AM without going back home), so please don't trouble yourself. If you're done with work, why don't you hurry and leave already? You're getting on my nerves.☞

It was a blatant refusal that was like slamming a door at his face, so he couldn't think of what else to say. He had been hoping that he would rely on him even a little if he was in trouble, but that had been just hope after all. Perhaps it would've been better if he didn't offer to help in the first place.... As Hirose was thinking that, he heard a voice from his back.

☞Why don't you just act like you have no other choice and let him help you out?☞

☞What the hell did you say?!☞

Kawakami crashed the chair as he stood up. He didn't have far to look, since the owner of the voice was staring at Kawakami. It was Yamakami, who was pretty close to Kawakami.

☞Why don't you just come out and ask for his help? Even if you search around, it's hard to find someone who's willing to help out even if you beg them, much less someone who's nice enough to offer help. I'd refuse even if you ask me as a favor.☞

Hirose realized that Kawakami was going to jump him, so he hurriedly blocked them with his body. Kawakami couldn't see because of tall Hirose, so he violently tried to shove aside the wall in front of him.

While Hirose was holding Kawakami down, Yamakami hurriedly left the office. Kawakami, who was left in the office, managed to shake off Hirose who was pressing down on him. He went to Yamakami's desk and kicked the metal drawers with all his strength.

That seemed to have calmed his anger down somewhat. Kawakami returned to his desk, and started to enter data again violently, making loud tapping noises.

He wondered what he should do. If he persistently offered help, he thought it'll be like pouring oil on the fire. But he still felt bad about just ditching him and leaving.

When Hirose just stood there, numbly staring at him wordlessly, Kawakami stopped typing and glared at him.

☞You leave, too. It's not everyday that you finish early.☞

“...I was supposed to meet someone, and I still have some time left.”

“You're really weird.” Kawakami muttered, as if to himself, and he took out one pile of contact information and handed it over to Hirose.

“Compare the contact information in the computer and this document, and you just need to type in their company name, address and phone number if it's missing.”

“Got it.”

Taking the contact information booklet, he returned to his seat. It wasn't a lot of document, so he started with a light heart, thinking that it wouldn't take very long. But it wasn't even 5 minutes after he started entering the data that this was going to take a lot longer than he thought. It was a simple work that didn't require him to think. Worrying about his surroundings, he moved his fingertips as fast as possible. As it got closer and closer to 7 PM, anxiety started to slowly envelope his entire body.

It won't end on time, no matter how he tried. It's going to take at least one more hour. He's the one who offered help, so he can't just leave this work halfway. But... He can't push back his meeting with Arita, no matter what.

When it started to get closer to 7 PM, he started to pay more attention to Arita who might be waiting at the lobby than to the list. When the clock reached 7 sharp, Hirose couldn't wait any longer, and he stood up from his seat.

“What is it?”

Ignoring Kawakami's question, he ran out of the office. It felt like a waste of time even waiting for the elevator, so he ran down the stairs, as if tumbling down from it. When he reached the bottom of the stairs and looked around the front lobby, there was already someone who was wandering nearby the empty, darkened reception area.

Mr. Arita. The thought made him breathless with happiness, so he ran like a track team who was in their last spurt towards the shadow.

“Long time no see. But you don't have to run like that. I'm not going to leave just because you're few minutes late.”

His rush made his cheeks red and his heart was thumping violently. His breathing was uneven. He couldn't even answer him right away.

He was holding brown suit jacket slung over his left hand, and his right hand held a small suitcase. His smiling face had slightly different impression than it did before. It may be because his hair--especially his bangs--was cut back neatly.

“Something was thumping and crashing near the staircase, so I thought there was a bear or something.”

Looking amused, Arita started to laugh. He couldn't tear his eyes away from corners of his lips that gently dissolved. He suddenly remembered that he managed to kiss those lips before, so he started blushing.

“Then, shall we head out?”

Arita glanced at his watch and started to leave. He held his arm. He couldn't speak for few seconds. Looking back, Arita cocked his head slightly.

“...My work ...is still not done. I'm sorry.”

“Work? Is that so... Then I could've moved our meeting to a later time. Why didn't you tell me that you're busy?”

“I'm sorry.”

“About how long do you think it'll take?”

“...Maybe an hour.”

“Then, what should I do?” Mumbling to himself, Arita hopelessly glanced at the darkened lobby.

“This area doesn't really have a store that I can kill time at...Oh yeah, why don't you take me to where you work? I'll sit next to you and wait until you're done.”

“Um, but...”

Like a tiny child who found a fun game, Arita broke into a smile.

“I'll stay by your side and nag you, so that you can be done even 1 minute faster.”

His back shoved by Arita, he got on the elevator. When they stood side by side, his eye level was the same as the top of Arita's head. From higher up, he glanced at his profile sideways. Since a while ago, he thought that Arita's eyelashes were longer than other peoples'. His lips opened slightly, then red tongue lightly licked the top of his lips and went right back inside.

The guilty feeling of seeing what he was not supposed to see started to spread throughout his chest, but he couldn't tear his eyes away. He wanted to keep watching his every move, even including tiny tremble of his eyelids. ... He knew that Arita didn't welcome his passionate gaze, but still.

The elevator reached the 8th floor and chimed as it stopped moving. Like breaking out of a spell, Hirose came to.

Arita had stepped out first. He light poked Hirose's shoulder, who was following him from behind.

“I think I should make you pay for every time you look at me from now on.”

He was embarrassed that Arita caught his obvious stare, so he lowered his gaze. ...Arita did not say anything further.

Chapter 4

“Where did you go? You suddenly left, so you surprised me.”

As soon as Hirose poked his head out from the door, Kawakami noticed him and yelled at him. However, he closed his mouth right away when he noticed Arita who curiously glanced around from Hirose's back.

“Who's that?” He asked with his eyes, and curiously tilted his head. Before Hirose had a chance to introduce them to each other, Arita stepped forward and lightly bowed to Kawakami.

“I'm always in your debt. I'm Arita, from the Asahina Branch.”

“I'm Kawakami. Welcome.”

He seemed to have realized that Arita was his superior, since he hurriedly bowed his head as well.

“So what work do you have left?”

He offered the chair beside his own, but Arita didn't sit. He looked at Hirose's computer screen.

“You enter data into these empty spaces.”

Arita flipped through the documents that Hirose handed to him.

“It has weird holes in it. It'll be a lot of work to fix all this. You guys don't have the original disk for this data?”

“We've looked for it, but nothing matched the search words.”

“How weird...”

So muttering, Arita pressed his right hand against corner of his lips, as if thinking.

“We only have a little more to go.”

When Hirose tried to start the data entry again, Arita picked up the phone on the desk next to Hirose's, and dialed someone. After he finished a short conversation that only lasted 2-3 minutes, he logged out of Hirose's user screen, saying that he won't take long.

Wondering what he was about to do, he looked back and forth between Arita's hands and his screen. Arita logged into someone else's account, using a different password, and passed few folders before he found the shipping list. Within seconds, the computer screen showed the complete shipping list before it had holes in its data.

“You can just copy and paste this whole thing.”

Kawakami, who was watching what was going on in the screen from Hirose's back, also seemed amazed at Arita's skills and had his mouth dropped open.

Hirose inserted a floppy disk inside the computer. It didn't even take 1 minute for the entire thing to be copied.

☞How...This definitely wasn't there when I looked for it before...☞

At Hirose's question, Arita proudly answered,

☞I borrowed Miyata's password. I figured that the superiors would obviously have all shipping information. But they were really making you do a lot of work, fixing this hole-ridden list by hand. Oh yeah, keep it a secret to your superiors that you've made a copy, since that's cheating.☞

After handing over the floppy disk with copied data in it, Hirose started to get ready to leave. Kawakami seemed speechless at first, but their work was done and there was no point in him staying, so he turned off his computer and got up from his chair.

They got out of the office at the same time and Hirose missed the timing to say good-bye to him, so they all got into the elevator together.

☞I was sorry about before. You've only offered to help.☞

In the silent box, Kawakami suddenly muttered.

☞I got anxious and I was really rude to you. I'm sorry.☞

☞I don't mind it.☞

Arita glanced up at Hirose, as if asking him what happened.

☞Mr.... Kawakami is my partner at work right now. Two of us are working as a team right now.☞

☞Oh, so that's what happened. Oh, Kawakami, if you have no other plans, why don't you come eat with us?☞

☞Eat?☞

☞I'm going to go with Hirose, but the more the merrier, right?☞

Kawakami hesitated, looking upwards.

☞How about it?☞

When Arita smiled, the lingering hesitation on Kawakami's expression dropped away.

☞Then I'll join you.☞

It was hard for Hirose to decide whether it was natural or unnatural for Arita to suddenly invite Kawakami.

Was he trying to avoid just two of them eating? But if he didn't want that, he wouldn't have invited him to have dinner in the first place.

Arita headed the party. The place he lead them to was a traditional bar and restaurant. He said he found it when he came here for business training four years ago.

Kawakami, who was friendly, only was cautious to Arita sitting opposite him for first few minutes. When he got used to him, he kept asking questions, as if they've known each other for a while.

If someone who was not familiar with them saw them, they would think that Kawakami and Arita were close friends. Hirose was discouraged by the two's conversation, so he was quietly listening to them.

☞So, you were Hirose's superior, Mr. Arita. I'm sorry for saying lots of things that must've seemed rude to you. I thought maybe you were the superior, but somehow, you didn't seem like a difficult person, so...☞

☞I am his superior, but I'm more like his upperclassman. Right, Hirose?☞

☞That's true.☞

The conversation was aimed at him, so Hirose smiled awkwardly. Most of the conversation was taking place between Arita and Kawakami. Sometimes Arita headed the topic to him, but Kawakami would grab end of the sentence, and he would be swept in his pace.

After their meal, they've ordered few bottles of alcohol. It was gentle and sweet liquor that tasted like it would have high number of proofs. Arita was always easy to talk to, but he seemed to be in a even better mood than normal. He shot down glass after glass of alcohol that Kawakami offered him, as if it were water. He was worried, but he seemed to be enjoying himself, so he couldn't tell him to stop drinking or offer him water instead.

☞He's probably slow at working.☞

Arita leaned against Hirose who was sitting next to him and mumbled. His breath touched his cheek. Just by that, even though he hadn't drank much, his face became warm. Kawakami's eyes started to twinkle just a little at this.

☞That's true. he's slow, and he's...☞

☞But he's going to take the responsibility and do a great job until the very end.☞

Arita's fingers, which touched his shoulders, pressed down a little bit harder.

☞Well, sure...☞

☞He'll be serious, but nice. I know he looks dull, so he'll frustrate you sometimes, but please take it easy and follow along with him. It might sound like I'm saying it just to sound good, but I think he's someone with lots of possibilities. I don't think... you'll have any disadvantages by working with

him.

Hirose was heavily complimented in front of Kawakami. He felt really embarrassed, so he closed his eyes and hunched his back. Even after Arita's fingers left him, he couldn't forget about the carelessly left warmth on his body, remaining there as if Arita had forgotten about it.

When Hirose suddenly looked down, his gaze crossed with Arita, who was looking up at him right in front of him. Arita strongly held Hirose's shoulders and pinched up end of his nose with his left hand. He grinned.

"Your face is bright red."

After leaving the restaurant, Kawakami and Arita were both quite drunk, but they nevertheless entered the shot bar* that Kawakami brought them to.

However, in the middle of talking, Kawakami collapsed on the counter and started to doze off. Arita and Hirose looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders.

"I heard Miyata is training you pretty harshly. Are you okay?"

While sipping at a cocktail contained in a long, narrow glass, Arita questioned him.

"He really doesn't know how to pace the work, so I was worried that I introduced you to him."

"That's not a problem at all. Outside office work is fun."

Arita's glass quickly emptied, so Hirose quickly ordered water from the waiter. Arita suddenly cocked his head.

"I think you've drank enough, Mr. Arita. I'm sorry."

Arita pressed his finger tips against his forehead.

"My vision is definitely starting to spin... I don't think I've ever drank this much since I've entered the company."

"Are you all right?"

When he asked, concerned, Arita slightly smiled.

"Somehow, I felt like drinking... I didn't plan on drinking this much, though."

Afraid that Arita would fall asleep, Hirose nervously looked at his face. As if noticing that, Arita laughed, saying, "Should we head back?"

When he paid and shook Kawakami awake to head outside, the last train had already left.

“Are you okay?”

So saying, Arita was holding Kawakami up, but his walking didn't look too good, either. Their arms around each other's shoulders, they were both leaning on each other to form the letter X. He didn't think he'd ever seen Arita this drunk.

Arita was wobbling down the road as if he were in water. He suddenly stopped and stared at his watch.

“I didn't book a hotel...”

It seemed like Arita had no plans to stay overnight. When Kawakami heard that, before Hirose had a chance to speak, he got close to Arita and held his shoulder. It seemed like he was hugging him. Hirose felt burning sensation in his stomach, as if he had gulped down a high proof alcohol.

“Mr. Arita, don't say thing like that. One night is no problem; just stay at my room.”

“But...”

“Kawakami, you're making Mr. Arita uncomfortable.”

Hirose roughly ripped Kawakami away from Arita.

“Awesome; it's decided.”

Not even noticing that he was roughly pushed away, Kawakami grabbed Arita's arm and dragged him away.

“Taxi—”

Kawakami cheerfully lifted up an arm.

It seemed that Kawakami liked Arita, since he kept clinging on to Arita even when they were in the taxi. No matter how many times Hirose told him off, he ignored him. Arita was just laughing. Even when the taxi arrived at the dorm, Arita seemed to be hesitating and moving his feet slowly. Growing impatient, Kawakami grabbed and pulled at Arita's arm.

“There, there, don't feel uncomfortable.”

“But still, I'm an outsider, so...”

Arita looked back at Hirose. His eyes looked troubled. His right arm was faster than his thought process. He grabbed Arita's arm and pulled him towards himself. Arita was pulled back and forth between Hirose and Kawakami, like a doll stuck between children's fight. But in the end, Arita

seemed to shake off Kawakami's hand and fell to Hirose's chest.

☞I have something to discuss alone with Mr. Arita.☞

Hirose said, pulling Arita towards him. Kawakami curiously wrinkled his eyebrows. Arita lost his balance and was draped over Hirose's chest, smiling at Kawakami.

☞We might talk for a long time, and I'll crash at Hirose's place if it gets really late.☞

☞Then will you do thatt...? Good night. Today was fun. Please invite me again.☞

Stumbling, Kawakami crossed over the main gate with uncertain steps. The floor was wooden like an old school, and the heavy, noisy footsteps faded away.

The weight lifted from ends of his fingers. Arita had managed to stand with both feet. Arita numbly faced Hirose underneath faded light, in front of the main entrance.

☞Will it be okay for me to stay at your room?☞

His voice sounded throaty.

☞As long as it's fine with you, Mr. Arita.☞

Arita lowered his head and widely yawned.

☞Then I'll trouble you.☞

They ended up entering the dorm, as if following after Kawakami.

☞It's messy, but please come in.☞

Arita sauntered into the room and curiously looked around him as Hirose cleaned his books and clothes.

☞Please sit down.☞

When he offered, Arita sat down with his back touching the window wall. He took a deep breath and loosened his neck tie, removing it from his throat.

☞I'm... kind of thirsty.☞

He loosened one button from his shirt. And then he took a deep breath again.

☞You haven't drank at all. You just kept your mouth shut without saying much... But I guess it can't be helped if that loud mouth is your partner. He doesn't seem like a bad guy, but he's a bit noisy.☞

Yawning widely, he closed his eyes and lowered his head sideways, rolling on his side. It seemed like such uncontrolled behavior for someone like Arita.

“Mr. Arita? Drink some water.”

Holding ice water in one hand, he lightly tapped his shoulder. No matter how much he shook him and called out to him, he didn't budge. While he was wondering what to do, Arita finally managed to open his eyes slightly.

“Water”

His stretched out right hand grabbed Hirose's arm next to it. Using that as center weight, he tried to sit up. At the same time, he pulled at him, so Hirose almost fell down along with the cup. He hurriedly straightened his back.

Arita stood up, as if rubbing his entire body against Hirose's. He grabbed Hirose's right hand holding the cup, and brought the whole thing to bring the cup against his lips.

Their hands brushed against each other's. His palm seemed to hotly stick against his skin. Arita was drinking water, right next to him. Every time he swallowed, his Adam's apple moved up and down. After he drank all the water, his lips that still craved moisture opened and bit down on an ice cube.

Making licking sounds, he rolled the ice with end of his tongue, and then he bit down on it. He crunched it several times before swallowing it. Arita ate rest of the ice, doing the same thing.

It seemed like his red tongue that he stuck out moved like a living animal, so he couldn't tear his eyes away from edge of Arita's lips.

Hirose finally tore his gaze away when the empty cup fell on top of the tatami. At the same time, Arita collapsed against Hirose's chest and muttered in a tiny voice, “I'm sleepy.”

Arita seemed half-asleep. Hirose moved him to corner of the room and changed into pajamas.

His room was amazingly tiny, only spanning 4 and a half *jou*. (1 *jou* = 1 *tatami*.) It was suicidal to have a bed on this tiny room, so Hirose was taking the trouble to spread out and cleaning his blanket every single day. So obviously, such tiny room would not be prepared for any guests, and he only had one blanket. He hurriedly pulled a new sheet over the blanket and got it ready. When he turned around, he thought Arita had been sleeping quietly, but he had been numbly staring at Hirose's movements with his back against the wall. He looked helpless.

He pulled out a T-shirt and short pants from the closet and handed them over to Arita.

“These are washed, so please wear them instead of pajamas. Will you be okay with bathing tomorrow morning?”

Arita nodded and started to get undressed. In a sitting position, he pulled off his shirt and pulled down his pants. He's the one who said the clothes are for pajamas, so of course Arita would change into them. And normally, they were both guys so it was nothing to be concerned about, but

he felt guilty so Hirose hurriedly turned his back to Arita. The sounds of changing cloth brushed against his eardrums. When the sounds stopped, Hirose turned around. His eyes met with Arita's, who was holding his old clothes in one hand.

“Sleep in that blanket over there. Just leave your shirt and suit there; I'll hang them up.”

“How about you?”

Arita sleepily asked him.

“Are you sleeping with me?”

Smiling, Hirose replied,

“I'm going to sleep in the sleeping bag.”

Arita cocked his head, but he seemed to have understood. He crawled over to the blanket and rolled up his body into a ball, like a sleeping kitten.

Chapter 5

Sleeping directly on top of tatami hurt, so whenever he shifted, Hirose woke up. It was also a problem that he felt Arita's presence right next to him... Hirose shifted back and forth several times, and then pulled the sleeping bag over his head.

“Hirose.”

He was surprised that his name was called. Arita tapped at his shoulder. When he only stuck his head out and looked towards the direction where he was called, he saw that Arita was lying on his stomach and looking up at his face.

“Come over here; it looks like you have trouble sleeping. I'm okay.”

“But...”

“I told you, I'm OK.”

Even while looking at Arita, his head knew that it would be better not to go to him. However, he walked towards the blanket, as if he was dragged there. When his body slightly slipped next to Arita, warm air surrounded his body. He definitely felt that Arita had been sleeping here. So he became nervous for another reason, and couldn't fall asleep.

Arita was sleeping, his back turned towards Hirose. Hirose also had turned sideways. His body didn't move at all. He was afraid that if he moved even a bit, his body would touch Arita's. He didn't want him to think that he did that on purpose. He was a man, so of course he had urges. However, he didn't want Arita to know he had such dirty thoughts about a person who had same sex as his.

But the urges surged in from time to time. He's sleeping in one blanket with the person he loved.

He wasn't innocent.

What would happen if he pretended to move around in his sleep, and hugged Arita from the back? He was scared of touching him, but he definitely also had a side where he wanted to touch him, no matter what.

He couldn't sleep. Soon, dawn would break out. After coal-black hour had passed away, perhaps his feelings would calm down somewhat.

☞M... Mm.☞

With a soft sound, Arita shifted. He felt Arita's hair against back of his neck. His entire body shook at the shock. The soft feel of hair against his skin.

Arita's arms that moved from his back suddenly wrapped around Hirose's tummy, as if hugging a pillow. At the same time, he was strongly pulled, so Hirose who had been lying sideways suddenly faced the ceiling.

Arita's forehead was shoved against his chest. Arita's two hands crossed over Hirose's chest, as if rubbing against him. He wrapped his arms around his back and tightened his hold, as if hugging him. Arita's face started to get near Hirose's neck.

His entire body stiffened. Without moving his head, he looked at Arita on top of his chest with only his eyes. He was certainly asleep. If not, Arita would've never touched him. Even his gaze used to freak him out.

When a little time passed, he calmed down a bit. It felt like the weight on his chest and the warmth of the body wasn't such a big deal. He moved his left hand slightly. He wanted to touch the hair that moved on top of his chest, so he lightly pinched the tip of the hair. It was a normal hair; not too soft nor too stiff.

Hirose felt Arita move on top of his body. Is he going to pull away....? He thought. However, Arita shoved his body upwards instead.

They looked at each other in the darkness. Their gazes crossed over the short distance. Arita's two arms held Hirose, as if holding him in place, and pushed tips of his fingers into his hair. As if he's touching him lovingly, he softly touched his hair again and again. He thought perhaps this is a dream.

Maybe he was just having a really awesome dream. Maybe he just thought about it so much that Arita came out in his dreams. But the realistic dream didn't end. The fingertips that touched his forehead softly patted down his eyelids, his cheeks, ends of his nose-- as if drawing his features. The fingertips that touched his lips slowly traced the shape, and then pushed inside his half-open lips.

He was shocked. The fingers softly and slowly touched inside of his mouth. Hirose was so surprised at Arita's boldness that all he managed to do was to shove his tongue deep in his throat. For a long time, the fingers played with Hirose's mouth, and then they suddenly pulled out, as if they got bored of the game.

Arita licked his finger, wet with saliva, with ends of his tongue. Hirose numbly stared at the erotic movement of his tongue.

His hair was grabbed violently. Hirose wrinkled his face in pain, and then suddenly softness pushed against his lips. He was pushed strongly.

☞Arita...☞

He was so surprised that he turned his head to the side, but the lips followed him. Arita turned his head and kissed him again. It was so strong that he couldn't breath; his lips were locked in place...

☞Why, why, why☞

Questions crashed into his head. Arita had a strong phobia against relationship between men. So why would he kiss him like this? Does he know that he is kissing me right now?

Only question marks flew around his head, so even if Arita boldly seduced him with ends of his tongue, he couldn't answer him.

Their lips parted. His eyes looked down on Hirose. His eyes grew used to the darkness and made out a faded silhouette of Arita's body shape. It was a lot thinner than he thought it would be.

The silhouette's fingers slowly started to loosen Hirose's pajama buttons. Cold air fumbled at his skin.

Arita's fingers grabbed Hirose's elbows. Arita's head followed, and dropped to Hirose's naked chest. His tongue licked top of his heart, and then clung onto the protrusion nearby. His head blanked out at the shock and sexual arousal.

Arita pushed Hirose back against the blanket and greedily clung onto his nipples. Arita's lips moved from right to left. As he did that, he made licking sounds like a cat drinking water.

Hirose rolled on the floor, letting Arita do whatever he wanted. He felt like he would become insane from the forced sensation.

Arita's right hand moved suspiciously. From his waist, he sneaked his hand underneath Hirose's pajamas. It touched his sex organ hidden by a thin piece of cloth, so Hirose hurriedly pulled his waist back.

☞Mr. Arita...☞

The fingertips didn't pull away. When he slowly touched him beyond the cloth, his already hardened center started to show off its shape even more.

☞Stop it, please...☞

Heartless Arita's fingers didn't let Hirose go, and pulled down his pants so that his excited organ would show. He teared from the embarrassment that burned into his spine. Even so, Hirose

couldn't shake off the man on top of him.

Arita played with the appeared organ without any hesitation. He softly and the strongly grabbed it, and rubbed against the concaved area. He pushed him to his limit. He couldn't even ask him to stop now. He was forced to the end, and when he came in Arita's hand, Hirose felt regret after a brief heaven. It was ugly, embarrassing, disgusting...

Arita touched between Hirose's legs with his dirtied hand, and then his fingertips touched his dirtiest area. Arita slowly raised his face and stared into Hirose's eyes. They got closer and closer like that, and then their lips touched.

When Arita's fingers grabbed Hirose's wrist and led it to Arita's, Hirose felt his fingertips trembling. His hand was strongly shoved against it, so he definitely felt it in his palms. However, his fingertips couldn't touch him, nor grab him. He was so afraid that he couldn't do anything.

Arita rubbed himself against Hirose's hand, which remained still like a piece of wood. He comforted himself like that. Suddenly, Arita started to breath irregularly, and then softly panted. In the end, he made strange little whine and let go on top of Hirose's stomach.

It looked like Arita was laughing. He wiped the nasty residue with nearby T-shirt that he stripped, and pressed his forehead against Hirose's chest like a kitten.

Within few minutes, he started to breath regularly.

His cold head didn't even attempt to fall asleep. Hirose dumbly stared at the dark skies slowly lightening up.

The person next to him shifted few times. Every time, he was surprised and gathered his shoulders. He checked again and again to make sure that he was still sleeping, and sighed in relief.

As he looked at the profile, who seemed to be comfortably asleep, he wondered what the hell just happened. He had been shaken up, like a storm.

Was it just a mean joke? Hirose had no experience of the sort, but did boys touch each other just for fun occasionally?

If not, did he mistaken him for someone else...? How was he supposed to face him when he woke up? Would Arita be able to remember at all? He was completely wasted. Could he just ignore that this happened? If he asked... He thought that they couldn't even remain as friends at that point.

He slowly pulled out of the blanket. He rolled the dirty pants and pulled off shirt into a ball and shoved them inside his pocket, and changed into new ones. It was a relief at least that Arita wasn't undressed.

If he touched him, he might open his eyes. Hirose cleaned up after himself so that it looked like nothing happened. He pulled away from Arita, and pulled the sleeping bag over his head.

He suddenly opened his eyes at the loud footsteps stomping around the hallway outside. He must have fallen asleep at some point. When he hurriedly got up, his eyes crashed into Arita's, who seemed to have woken up first. It shocked him.

“Did... did you sleep well?”

His voice sounded tight, as if it were not his voice. Arita pressed his forehead with one hand and shortly replied, yeah.

He thought he couldn't calm down unless he did something, so he leaped to his feet and cleaned the sleeping bag that he had slept on.

“You didn't go yesterday, so go ahead and bath first. I'll give you some towels.”

Hirose kept shifting his gaze, so that he didn't have to look at Arita's face. Even when he handed the towel over to him, Hirose didn't look at Arita. After sending him off to bath, as if kicking him off, Hirose hurriedly cleaned the blanket that Arita slept on, and took out the suit that Arita can change into.

As soon as Arita came back, he went to take a bath also. When Hirose returned, Arita had finished changing into his suit and was sitting next to the table, watching TV.

“Aren't you hungry?”

“Not really...”

“Shall we go outside to grab something to eat?”

“Should we?”

He hurriedly dried his wet hair and picked up his wallet.

“When do you plan to go back, Mr. Arita?”

“It'll be best for me to return as soon as possible.”

At his thorny words, Hirose turned to look at him, not knowing what to do.

“I have work starting from the afternoon today. I have to go now. Sorry for troubling you.”

His tone suddenly softened.

“Will you do that?”

He thought he had just imagined his cold voice moments before. He thought Arita was his normal self. However, the relief was short, as Arita grabbed his suitcase and hurriedly walked towards the

exit.

☞I'll take you there☞

☞It's fine; I'm not a kid. I'll go by myself.☞

That's what he said, but something troubled him. There was something off about Arita's attitude. He couldn't tell if he was angry or not.

☞Then I'll see you later. This is far enough.☞

If he says that, he couldn't follow him. He said goodbye to Arita from his room and hurriedly ran to the windows. He saw Arita's back running across the other side of the sidewalk. It faded out, and quickly became tiny so he couldn't see him any longer.

Hirose managed to finally call Arita about one month after they had crashed into each other like a car accident. The downpours stopped, so it was right before it officially became summer. He couldn't stop thinking about Arita's attitude by the time they parted. He couldn't tell if he was angry or not. But even more confusing was Arita touching him, as if seducing him on purpose. He couldn't think of it as behavior of the same person who was disgusted even by him staring at him.

He knew there must be a reason, but he couldn't get narcissistic and think that Arita had fond feelings for him or something.

Arita knew that he liked him, so he wondered if he had been doing that half out of joke... But Arita was a person who was more considerate of other's feelings than anyone else. He thought that he wouldn't do something like that, even as a joke.

He couldn't figure out Arita's true feelings, and only uncomfortable truth that they had sexual encounter as two men remained. He was so uncomfortable that he couldn't even reach out to him, but just thinking about how Arita behaved that night made Hirose's lower body itch and heat up. He scolded his beastly head and kept resolving to himself that he loved Arita more deeply than just sexually, but he couldn't be all platonic and separate his mind's fondness from his body's desire.

He couldn't bear the thought of Arita regretting his actions that day, even more than how much he hated himself. He thought even if he called him, he couldn't talk and Arita would hang up on him. As he kept thinking about things like that, time passed by. Around that time, he had an opportunity to contact Arita because of work-related topic.

They had a big event ahead of them. He had to order more of the sample that Asahina branch sent out order forms for, so he could have just faxed over the amended order form, but Hirose chose to call him instead.

At first he called Arita's home. However, Arita was away from home, so he left the message on the answering machine, asking him to call him back. That day, there was no contact from Arita. Nor the

next day, nor the day after. On the 4th day, he called him again. It was answering machine again. He left the same message. Two days passed by, but Arita still did not answer him.

He didn't want to suspect it, but was he really absent so that the answering machine had to take the message? He couldn't stop suspecting... He ended up thinking that Arita grew to hate him so much that he didn't even want to hear his voice.

He became insane, thinking about his phone calls that weren't answered. His only strength was that even though he took a long time to finish his task, he never made mistakes. But he kept making small mistakes nowadays...

When the clock hands pointed at twelve, which was their lunch hour, as soon as the bell rung Kawakami grabbed Hirose's neck and dragged him outside.

After they drank together, Kawakami started to depend on Hirose for many things. He knew that Kawakami was changing his opinion of him, and was trusting him. Hirose totally welcomed working together and cooperating. His problem with Kawakami was solved, but...

They entered the inner side of forest of buildings. There weren't many people around because it was still morning. Kawakami took Hirose to a dirty tea shop that looked undesirable. As they entered, without even asking Hirose, he ordered,

☞Two Today's Specials, coffee for dessert.☞

☞You know...☞

Sitting on other side of him, Kawakami deeply breathed in. Hirose lowered his head and did not lift his face.

☞Are you okay?☞

It was surprisingly kind voice.

☞You were weird since a while back. You were strangely in the air. But well, you always did your work well, so I didn't say anything, but you were the WORST today.☞

He knew that. He didn't need to hear about it. Hirose didn't have anything to say in response.

☞Did something come up? If you're okay with me, I'll be happy to hear your problems out.☞

No matter how he worded it, he couldn't discuss this with anyone else. Hirose took a sip of the water. It was lukewarm.

☞Isn't this place awful?☞

Kawakami whispered into his ears in a soft voice.

☞The food is disgusting and their service sucks. So no one from the company would come to a place like this.☞

Hirose started to laugh without meaning to. Kawakami had been considerate to bring him here. Hirose took another sip of the nasty lukewarm water.

“They're not answering the phone.”

“Phone?”

Kawakami had a cigarette in his mouth. He paused lightening it up, and asked,

“So, you're talking about your lover?”

“It's one sided feeling on my part. But the other side knew about my feelings, and was bearing with me by being friends with me...”

He chose his words carefully. Kawakami puffed out cigarette smoke.

“What the hell did you do?”

He startled, his spine trembling. He didn't say anything, but even that seemed enough for him to figure him out. Kawakami had a bullying, wide smile on his face.

“What have you done, you pervert.”

“We were drunk...”

“So you had sex with her while you guys were drunk, huh?”

“No no, they were the one who were drunk... They touched me...”

Holding his cigarette between his fingers, Kawakami leaned his body back on the chair.

“Wouldn't that be totally awesome, then?”

“I'm not happy about it. I was touched because they were drunk. If that would make me happy, I'd be pathetic.”

Kawakami muttered, Y...yeah.

“I guess you have pride, too. But, you know, she might have seduced you, knowing that it's you. She might have suddenly fallen for you...”

“I don't think that would ever be possible.”

He confessed, and he had been horribly rejected. Even so he wanted to see him, so he approached him so carefully, and taking his time, they finally managed to be friends...

He couldn't even wish for something like their relationship ever developing beyond friendship... So he had been satisfied with a kiss alone. Feeling dizzy, Hirose covered his face with his hands.

“Um, what I'm saying is just a guess, but... I don't know what kind of person is Hirose's love interest, nor how her thought process works. But if you're worried about her, why don't you go see her in person?”

Kawakami simplified the problem and shoved it aside.

“You're worried about how she thinks of you, right? Just ask in person how she thinks about you. If she says no, just forget about her.”

“They're at the Asahina Branch. It's not easy to go see them in person.”

“So what? Just take a last *shinkansen* after work, and you'll arrive within tonight. Tomorrow's the weekend, so if all works out, you might stay in her bed this Saturday and Sunday with warm thoughts.”

He did want to meet him, definitely. But, he couldn't. He couldn't because he was scared of finding out for sure.

“If you don't want to do that, you can ask around instead. Didn't you say your superior Arita, whom we drank with before, was also from the Asahina Branch? He seemed like a nice guy, and you seemed close to him. Why don't you ask him if he could ask her? What do you think?”

“I can't ask him himself.”

His true feelings slipped out. When he realized that Kawakami's face was stiffening, he paled. No matter how “special” Arita was, it wasn't normal for him to have fallen in love with a man. It was his fault even if he was despised.

Kawakami didn't say anything for a while. Hirose didn't speak up, either.

The lunch was tiny, considering its price. They barely touched it. After just drinking the coffee, they left the store.

He thought he might feel better, but now he felt even worse. Sighing heavily, he sat down on his chair. There was a scribbled note on top of his desk that wasn't there when he was leaving for lunch.

“There was a phone call from Mr. Arita. He asked him to call you at work.”

He felt his fingertips shaking. This phone call came while they were talking. What did he want to talk about? Did he want to end everything? For a while, Hirose was staring at the note, frozen in place.

Holding the note tightly in his fist, Hirose dialed the buttons, his hands still shaking.

Chapter 6

“I'm sorry for suddenly calling you. Are you busy?”

Arita's voice on the other side of the phone sounded normal. Not angry, not anything... Just normal voice.

“No.”

Compared to that, his own voice was pathetically shaking.

“Really? That's good, then. It's not a huge thing, but I'm going to be there next week Thursday. How's your afternoon schedule? I'm thinking we can have dinner together if you have the time.”

Hirose was holding the receiver with one hand. His neck was trembling unnaturally. He couldn't answer right away.

“Hirose?”

To wordless Hirose, Arita asked, confused. All this time, even when he called him he didn't answer, so he was so sure that Arita was mad. Just now, he had been thinking of that, too. But now he was asking him to have dinner so naturally, as if nothing had happened. What was Arita thinking? Did he remember that day? No? Did he hate him? Didn't he?

If he felt disgusted, he wouldn't have called him, asking him to have dinner. But he didn't answer his phone, as if avoiding him... No matter how much he thought, he couldn't figure it out. He couldn't understand, so his head hurt.

“Hirose?”

His name was called again. Hirose strongly grabbed the receiver.

“On Thursday, I have company dinner with our business partner. I'm sorry.”

“Oh, really? Then forget about it. We'll have dinner later.”

Arita's voice didn't sound that disappointed. He was going to have dinner with his underclassman, but it didn't work out. Maybe it didn't matter to Arita. Those kind of thoughts spread through Hirose's chest.

In Hirose's viewpoint, the previous incident shook him up so much. But to Arita, it might have been a tiny accident.

“Then you must be in middle of work... I'll talk to you later.”

He sounded like he was going to hang up. Hirose grew anxious. He had turned down the invitation to dinner. Arita said “next time”, but when will he have the chance to come out here again? A week? Two weeks? A month, two months, or even half a year later?

“Thursday is empty.”

“Huh? You just said...”

“I’ve mistaken the week. I have the company dinner the Thursday after.”

“Oh, but you don’t have to push yourself. It’s fine if we meet up the week after that as well.”

“I told you, my schedule is fine.”

“Really? Then.... Should we meet up the same as last time?”

“At the main company lobby, 7 PM.”

“Do you want to meet up later than that?”

“No, it doesn’t matter.”

“Then I’ll see you next week.”

The phone hung up. It felt like his heart was frozen. He kept lying and lying, and he had been so desperate throughout the whole phone conversation.

“Mr. Hirose, are you okay?”

The girl next to him looked into his face, so he hurriedly turned to face her.

“Your face is really pale. Are you feeling ill?”

“I’m okay.”

He smiled, and moved his gaze to the computer monitor. The list of numbers didn’t enter into his brain at all. Hirose deeply sighed.

As Thursday approached, Hirose felt more uncomfortable than happiness at meeting Arita. He did want to see Arita. But could he act normally in front of Arita? Before, Arita said he felt disgusted with the way he looked at him. Now he had actually touched him. Would he be able to look at Arita without obvious desire in his eyes?

He still couldn’t find the answer to how Arita thought of him. Had he been even pushed out of the boundary of being a friend? Then what could he do? He thought he’d be nervous even choosing one word to speak.

It was hard for him to handle his own fickle mood. If it was going to be like this... it would have been better for him to just turn down their meeting, he thought, again and again. On Thursday itself, even when the bell chimed, signalling end of their shift, Hirose didn’t get up from his seat. He numbly stared ahead.

“Why do you look like you're going to die?”

He heard voice next to ear, so startled, he turned back. Kawakami had approached him unnoticed and was staring into Hirose's face.

“Our work is done. If you have nothing better to do, why don't we go drinking? The guys at the shipping department invited me out.”

Even when he found out that Arita was the person in Hirose's heart, Kawakami's attitude hasn't changed. The day after he was found out, he thought it couldn't be helped even if Kawakami ignored him. However, Kawakami talked to him, the same as always. Hirose relieved deeply in his heart. But... After that day, Kawakami and Hirose didn't talk about Asahina Branch or Arita at all.

“Thanks for asking, but... I have to meet someone today.”

Kawakami frowned heavily between his eyebrows.

“Just forget about meeting up with someone who's making you sigh that much since this morning. We'll gonna have much more fun together. You can get drunk all you want. I'll look after you.”

“But...”

Kawakami breathed out heavily, his hand resting on his hip.

“You can't see yourself, so you might be fine. But if you look depressed like that, you're causing trouble for everyone. Everyone is asking me, ‘What's wrong with Hirose?’”

“Sorry... I didn't know.”

“Well, everyone has their moments of slump, so it's okay. So-oh, hang out with me today. We'll forget about all bad things.”

Hirose lightly breathed in.

“Mr. Arita is going to come today.”

Kawakami looked cheerful, despite complaining. However, his expression suddenly changed.

“I'm supposed to have dinner with him. So I can't go.”

The silence frightened him. He couldn't look Kawakami in the face. As if trying to shake off those heavy feelings, Kawakami lightly tapped him on the end of his shoulder.

“Then, look a bit happier. Don't look like you're going to die any second.”

Kawakami was laughing hopelessly. When he saw that face, his words spilled out, as if they exploded.

“I can't understand Mr. Arita.”

Kawakami shrugged his shoulders.

“I don't understand you, either. When I think I finally figured out a li--ttle bit, it's a world of mystery again.”

It was just a change of heart.

“Won't you come, too, Kawakami? Three of us can drink together, like last time.”

“That's...”

Kawakami twisted the ends of his lips.

“There's no point in me going, either. I'll be just a third wheel. My promise with the shipping guys was first. And well, I don't think they'll care even if I don't show up, but still.”

Kawakami lowered his gaze and muttered. That's when he realized that he was so troubled that he selfishly dragged someone else into his problems. When he thought about it logically, he was asking a ridiculous favor.

“Sorry, that's true.”

When Hirose lowered his head, Kawakami shook his shoulder.

“I didn't say I'm not going to go. Let's go. I'm indebted to you as well.”

“Seriously, I'm okay. I'm sorry about that.”

Kawakami's lips started to open to say something, but froze halfway. Hirose smiled. He didn't want Kawakami to look troubled any longer.

“Mr. Hirose, are you going home now?”

Gentle, feminine voice. Kawakami had his back turned to the sound, but his face froze like ice. It was only when she got quite close that she realized that Hirose had been talking to Kawakami. At that moment, her red lips tightly closed into a horizontal line.

“I'm leaving soon. But today, I have a dinner date with someone else.”

He answered in a business-like tone. Isogai Mariko lowered her head, and tightly grabbed her handbag's lines with both of her hands. She lifted her face. Her huge, black eyes quietly looked at Hirose.

“When will you be available? Please let me know.”

Isogai spoke out, even though she knew Kawakami was here.

“Tell me when you'll be free, Mr. Hirose.”

Was love this cruel? Hirose felt dizzy. Saying that she loves him, she completely ignores Kawakami and tries to seduce Hirose. But... The cruel woman knew only too well what she was doing. Her shoulders pathetically shook.

“Today... I'm going to meet up with the person I love.”

She pressed her folded hands against her lips, and swallowed her breath in shock. Kawakami nervously grabbed Hirose's shoulders, saying, “Hey—”

“Hey, Hirose. You don't have to say it like that right now. And do something about your tone.”

Kawakami whispered to Hirose in a soft voice.

“No matter how I word it, the result is the same. I can't hang out with Ms. Isogai, and I have no intention to do so. I'm sorry.”

Bowing his head to Isogai, Hirose picked up his suitcase. He still had an hour to go before he was supposed to meet Arita, but he could spend that much time some where else.

“Then, Kawakami. I'll see you on Monday.”

He hurriedly walked away from the office. As if running away. No, in reality, he was running away. From the woman who was crashing her feelings against him so seriously. Why did he desire to escape? That's because... When he had been rejected by Arita, if someone like that had been by his side, he might have ended up being attracted to her despite knowing how Kawakami felt about her. He didn't hate her at all.

Getting on the elevator, he hurriedly pressed the button for the 1st floor. He thought that wanted to get away from those two as soon as possible. When he arrived at the ground floor, even though the door was only half open, he got out. He was about to run outside, but he was stopped by a loud voice.

“Hirose?”

He looked back. The sound came from small corner of the lobby that was prepared like a temporary resting place.

“Where are you going in such a rush?”

The shadow came nearer. As if he neck was choked, he couldn't let out his voice.

“Did something emergency happen?”

“No... Y, you're really early yourself, Mr. Arita.”

The last thing he saw was his turned back. The turned back that ran out of the dormitory.

“My work ended early, so I had some time left. I had a book I wanted to read, so I thought this was a nice, quiet place. You have to bear with it being a bit dark here, though.”

Arita put away the book he was holding in one hand, inside his bag. While he was looking at the ends of his hands, he remembered. The sensation of being touched by that. Those long fingers held him, and lead him onto climax. Just thinking about those times made his center throb.

“Mr... Hirose.”

The voice that followed him. At the bottom of the stairs, Isogai Mariko shook off Kawakami's arm that held onto her wrist and rushed at him. She ran too fast on high heels and lost her balance. She fell down few steps from where Hirose was standing. The contents of her bag scattered everywhere.

He ran to her hurriedly. Isogai didn't even bother picking up the contents of her bag that spilled out. As if she had been waiting for him, she clung onto Hirose.

“I'm... sorry”

He was pulled down strongly. Hirose was standing awkwardly, and he couldn't bear her weight, so he fell to the floor.

“I'm sorry”

End of her nose lightly rubbed against his chest. He couldn't push Isogai away, so Hirose carefully looked over his shoulder. Arita didn't look angry, nor amused. He was looking down at Hirose with an expressionless face.

He heard jingling sounds. Kawakami who was pushed away by Isogai was picking up the contents of her bag. As if he had been waiting until he picked up everything, Hirose stood up. Isogai, who had been leaning on him and clinging onto him, also stood up.

“I'm the one who should be sorry. I should've been clear about this from the beginning.”

He pulled away from her so that she stood alone. Isogai's shoulders were trembling violently.

“I'll take you home.”

From behind Isogai, Kawakami spoke out to her.

“I'm going to go by myself. I'm okay”

She organized her messed hair with ends of her fingers, and took the bag that Kawakami handed over to her. With a small voice, she muttered, I'm sorry. Kawakami held her hand without saying anything. Surprised, she shook her wrist, as if pushing him away.

“Get away from me. I hate you”

Kawakami ignored her and dragged her hand away.

“It hurts, get away from me. I hate you. I hate you the most in the world”

Kawakami stopped. With his free hand, he slapped Isogai's cheek. There was a loud slapping sound. Isogai's eyes became huge and round from the shock. Her expression quickly crumpled and tears spilled from ends of her eyes.

“No, no, no”

Isogai was dragged outside by Kawakami. Isogai's “No” rang in his ears endlessly.

In the silent lobby, only Arita and he were left.

“Aren't you the one who should be taking her home?”

Arita's voice was thickly colored with criticism for Hirose.

“There's no point in me taking her home.”

Arita sighed and brushed up his bangs.

“What... do you want to do now?”

Arita suddenly faced sideways and walked away, not bothering to answer Hirose. He hurriedly followed him from behind. He just walked, following Arita's back. Until they arrived at their destined store, the two didn't speak a word to each other.

Chapter 7

“Are you busy?” he asked. That was his first sentence after entering the store. They were at corner of the bar and restaurant that was part of a country-wide franchise. They ordered an appropriate first class meal and Arita asked after taking a sip of water.

“There is an event coming up, so it's starting to get chaotic.”

Hm, Arita muttered, lowering his leg.

“The girl just now. What's her name?”

Arita continued his question. Placing his finger against the knot of his necktie, he loosened it.

“Are you talking about Ms. Isogai?”

He thought that he did not wish to talk about Isogai, but he answered him anyway. Arita softly laughed.

“It looked like she was in love with you.”

“Um”

“It's not "Um." You made her chase after you quite brashly.”

Arita hit Hirose's shoulder, reaching across the tiny table.

“If it were me, I'd never want to lose such a beauty...”

“Mr. Arita!”

He didn't want him to go on in this kind of situation. Hirose forcefully cut off Arita's words.

“The one I love is you, Mr. Arita.”

“Thank you for waiting”

A young girl in kimono, her hair tied into three braids, placed beer and previously ordered dinner course on the table.

“Shall we toast first?”

Arita held up the glass cup with one hand. Without even saying what they were toasting for, they tapped their cup against each other's. After a sip, Hirose lowered his cup. However, Arita drank about half of the glass in one gulp. There was beer foam on his lips, so Arita wiped it away with back of his hand.

“I have something I want to tell you.”

“What... is it.”

“I've gotten a girlfriend. I'm thinking about marrying her.”

Arita had a seriously expression. So, Hirose couldn't ask him again.

“So, I think it'll be difficult for me to continue to meet you like we've been doing so far. I'd like to remain friends with you, but if you say that that'll be too hard for you, then I'm not going to meet you any more.”

Neither his left hand nor his right hand moved. He was just looking at Arita's face. But his eyes didn't tremble at all.

“It's abnormal for two men to be together, after all. You should forget about an older man, and hurry and look for a cute girl. Was her name Isogai? She's quite lovely, isn't she?”

He thought that he was being horrible. He closed his lips. He knew that Arita was examining his expression. But he didn't even have an ounce of strength of heart to think about Arita's feelings and try to hide his pain by acting cheerfully.

“Anyway. You must have brought your camera here, right? Did you go anywhere to shoot photos?”

Arita must have been concerned, since he completely changed the topic. How could he talk about camera in this kind of situation... He became so angry for no reason, that it felt like his voice was shaking.

“I was so busy working over the weekends that I didn't have the time to go anywhere for photo shoots. I brought my car on purpose, thinking that I'll go somewhere far away. But it just became a huge waste of money that's just eating up parking bills.”

Haha, Arita laughed.

“Well, I guess that can happen, too. You came here on a training, so maybe it was obvious that you wouldn't have time to go out and have fun.”

When his laughter faded away, he could only hear cacophony of surrounding patrons.

“Then, I'm... concerned about losing the photos that you took for me last time I was cleaning my house. I think I accidentally threw them out when I was taking out the garbage.”

“Is.... that so.”

“I'm really dumb sometimes.”

Arita grinned. He suddenly thought, perhaps he didn't lose them. Maybe he threw them away purposely. He got a girlfriend, so he didn't want to keep something like photos that were taken by a guy that was in love with him. Maybe the photos annoyed him, so he just threw everything away.

If that was a case, he didn't have to go and tell him about it. He wasn't going to go all the way to Arita's house to look for those photos. As long as Arita didn't say anything, he wouldn't have known anything.

“Aren't you going to eat?”

“Oh, thank you for the food.”

Removing the chopsticks from the wrap, he cracked it into two. He was done preparing. But holding the split chopsticks in his hand, his two hands remained frozen. He didn't... feel like eating anything.

“Hirose?”

He placed the chopsticks on top of the dish. Placing his elbows against the table, he held his forehead in his hands.

“I'm sorry.”

“What are you apologizing about?”

He stood still, not moving at all. But his head completely broke up, as if hail swept through it

multiple times. It was a wave called "The End" that kept repeating itself.

"I'm sorry for saying this when you bothered to invite me out, but... May I go home now?"

That was all he could manage to say.

Hirose took wide steps ahead by himself, forgetting that he was crashing into people and that he was still with Arita. It felt like invisible powers were moving his legs.

"Hirose"

He was called to a stop in front of the station. He probably felt that the surrounding area suddenly got brighter because this area had a lot of light poles. Arita lightly sighed and chose an usually bright fountain right in front of the station. He sat on its perimeter. After a short time, Hirose sat next to him as well.

"I'm sorry for today. I suddenly said something like that."

"No..."

The tempest inside his head refused to fade. He heard the train rushing into the station, so Hirose's shoulders shook a little with surprise.

"You must've been shocked."

"..."

The station exit overflowed with people. Like flowing water, they dissipated off to the road that faded away.

"You should look for a nice girl, too. I'm sure you'll find one. I guarantee it. You said you don't like her, but Ms. Isogai is a really fine woman."

Why was Arita suddenly pushing women to him like this...? Did he want to be free from the discomfort of a man loving him by getting rid of Hirose like this?

"Kawakami is the one who is in love with Ms. Isogai."

Arita opened his eyes widely, as if surprised.

"Oh... Come to think of it, I think you're right."

There was a clicking sound, followed by cigarette smell. Arita was smoking. Today, it felt like the smoke was seeping into his eyes with absurd force. He vaguely thought that it was a good thing that this happened while he was away. It would be so, so painful to watch Arita in love with someone else. Arita dragged up the ends of his shirt so that they covered ends of his fingers.

“I'm going to start heading back now. If I hurry, I'll be able to catch the last *shinkansen* (express train).”

“Um...”

Arita looked back and cocked his head.

“Um, the other night...”

What the hell was he saying? But he couldn't pick up the words that already popped out. It was cowardly of him to bring up that kind of joke at a time like this. He couldn't continue to speak. As if rushing the uncomfortable Hirose, Arita opened his lips.

“I'm sorry for last time. I was drunk, so I confused you with my girlfriend.”

The shock ran through his entire body for a moment, stealing his strength to even move the ends of his fingers. Hirose was frozen into place like a statue. Arita dropped words on top of Hirose's head as he stood up.

“Well then, good night.”

Hirose was no longer able to look at Arita in the face.

“Be safe.”

“You too. Careful on your way back home.”

The footsteps moved away from him. When he could no longer hear the footsteps, Hirose hugged his knees and started to cry. His tears wouldn't stop.

After that, he cried for nearly an hour next to the fountain. Sniffling, he came back to his dorm. It must've been a sight for a huge man to cry while walking. Gazes of people looking back at him were sharp.

The next day, he was totally late so he was called to the team manager, but he wasn't badly scolded. When he went to the washroom to wash his face, he was surprised. He had cried so much that he looked like a rabbit. His eyes were bright red and swollen until they were puffy.

When it was lunch time and he went outside to eat, Kawakami followed him. Kawakami tagged right next to him, but he didn't say anything. As if being dragged, he went to the horrible tea shop that he didn't want to go in, and ordered the day's special.

“Seeing your face... I can guess that something happened. No matter what kind of mistake you make today, I'm going to cover for you. So revive during the weekend, okay? By Monday, you have to start sparkling again.”

Kawakami patted his shoulder. His kindness deeply touched his heart, which became overly sensitive. Hirose hurriedly pressed his nose.

The daily special in front of their eyes had an overly burnt meatloaf. Kawakami poked it like a toy with ends of his chopsticks. He muttered,

“You know, yesterday... After I brought Isogai home... I forcefully held Isogai. Blood rushed to my head, so I held her by overpowering her. Now, beyond hating me, she called me a total pervert.”

Kawakami took out his fork.

“There was nothing else I could do. I'm not regretting it.”

...She refused, and he ended up raping her. So how could Kawakami be so calm about this?

“I've already done something that can't be forgiven. She said no, but I held her again and again. I did it until I was sick of it, so that she'd realize that it's me.”

“And you're still okay?”

Hirose asked, wondering if it didn't feel empty after doing something that didn't convey his feelings to her. Kawakami looked angry, and stabbed Hirose's meatloaf with his fork.

“I don't want to hear that from you. You're the reason why Isogai became like that. You look so dumb and innocent, but release pheromone that melts women like that. I'm the one who wants to ask you how you did it.”

Kawakami pulled the fork out, leaving a giant hole on Hirose's meatloaf.

“I already know. I'm the worst for only taking her body, but I'm so sick of waiting and standing around, doing nothing... So what's going on with you? You got dumped?”

He asked head-on, so he was reminded of yesterday's truth.

“Mr. Arita has a lover.”

Kawakami opened his eyes widely and lowered his shoulders. He asked in a quieter voice,

“A man?”

“That's not possible. It's a lady. He said that he's dating her with marriage on his mind.”

“That's weird. You said last time, you guys were doing this and that.”

At Kawakami's blunt way of talking, Hirose felt his vision blurring.

“He said that he confused me with his lover...”

“And that doesn't sound weird to you?”

Kawakami looked cocky on top of the chair.

“I have no idea how far you guys were messing around, but who'd confuse a man with a woman?”

He thought about how he had been touched by Arita. Arita didn't hesitate touching him, even when he felt the flat chest or touched symbol that women wouldn't have. He didn't seem surprised, either.

“Mr. Arita was drunk, so”

“Then, that was the day that I got drunk at the Shot Bar, right? He must have been drunk, too, but he didn't feel like he was so drunk that he would be like, I'm sorry but I don't remember anything. Isn't he lying about confusing you with someone else?”

“Why would Mr. Arita lie?”

“Then, you're just going to accept it after hearing things like that? It sounds so weird to me.”

It was definitely a far stretch to say that he had been confused, after listening to Kawakami. Then had he gotten close to him, even knowing that it was him? Why did he touch him and do other things, when he didn't even like him...?

Could he possibly... It was a hope that was as shallow as a dream. But if that was the case, then he felt that Arita could've confessed to him. He had no issues with telling him that he loved him, so if only Arita told him how he felt from his side.

But Arita had made a “lover”. If he liked Hirose, that would be a weird course of action. But last time... Did the chicken come first, or the egg? No matter how much he thought, he just circled around the same topic over and over again.

Hirose lowered his head and didn't say anything. Kawakami lightly spilled words to him.

“Maybe Mr. Arita likes you, too.”

“That's, not...”

“Then he hates you now after all. Give him up already.”

It was someone else's business, so Kawakami's opinion shook left and right, like a balloon. Arita had gotten a lover. He had promised with Arita. He would be satisfied with meeting him until he had gotten himself a lover, but still.

Could he give up? He asked himself. Would he be able to give up that person. If that person felt even a little bit of sympathy for this younger, dumb man. Even a single piece of his heart would

suffice. Wouldn't he have left a tiny corner of his heart for him? Just a little bit was all he was asking for. Even that would be enough.

He wanted to meet him. He didn't need anything else. He wanted to meet him right this second and convey his feelings to him. He couldn't suppress the desire, so in the middle of the meal, Hirose took out his wallet. It was before his monthly paycheck day, so his wallet contained nothing but several ten dollar bills. He looked at his wallet, then at Kawakami's face. He hesitated, but ended up asking him.

☞Kawakami... I'm sorry, but could you lend me some money?☞

☞It's okay, don't worry about it. I'll pay here.☞

Kawakami waved around a hand.

☞I'm not talking about that... Could you lend me like 300~400 bucks?☞

Edge of Kawakami's lips twitched and twisted.

☞Hold on, it's before salary day. I wouldn't have that kind of cash lying around.☞

☞I'll pay you back right away, so please?☞

Hirose lowered his head, as if hitting his forehead against the table.

☞What are you going to do with all that money?☞

☞I'm going to go back to Asahina. I want to go back today, no matter what. So please.☞

Kawakami tightly closed his mouth. And then he scratched back of his neck many times, muttering,

☞Man, you can't be helped.☞

As soon as work hours were over, he ditched his overwork and ran out of the company. It took about 30 minutes to walk to the station. Taking the taxi didn't even cross his mind, so he ran. He hurriedly bought the ticket and ran into shinkansen, and in the narrow passageway, he breathed in and out heavily. He hadn't ran this hard after graduating high school.

After he was able to breath regularly again, he found a seat. When he sat down, his shirt soaked with sweat coldly clung onto his back. When he calmed down and thought, he had boarded the train exactly as he had came to work this morning, so even if he wanted to stay over at Asahina, he wasn't prepared for anything. He had borrowed 300 dollars from Kawakami. That was barely enough to cover *shinkansen* round-trip ticket, so he couldn't stay at a hotel.

What if he went all the way there, and Arita wasn't there? What if he was out on a business trip

and didn't come back yet? He kept thinking about negative cases, and Hirose finally regretted his foolhardy deed. He thought he was a more careful type.

If he got off the next stop and took a transfer, he could return to his dorm. He could get a refund. His plans to go back, his plans to chase after him, would only end up being an attempt. He would end up not knowing the result...

But by the time he made a decision, the *shinkansen* had reached the station. He was so slow that he couldn't reach a conclusion at all in this short time frame. Unlike his attitude at the beginning, Hirose slowly walked out of the train station.

It was after 9 PM that he had arrived at Arita's apartment. He looked up at the window from the road, but there was no light in Arita's room.

Maybe he didn't come back yet, or he was already sleeping. Arita's apartment had a lock to enter the lobby, so a resident had to unlock it from his room, or Hirose had to enter the pin number. He couldn't reach his door. He rang the doorbell once, but Arita had no response.

There was nothing he could do, so he walked out to the road side and sat down on a place a little apart, thinking that he'd wait until Arita came back. Same thing happened last time. That was this spring, a day before he went up to Tokyo because he had been called away. He had wanted to see Arita's face one last time, so he had waited for Arita in this exact spot. At that time... He couldn't even call him out, so he had been waiting for Arita to come out. He waited, and waited. But it hadn't even been thirty minutes before the window opened and Arita looked at him, as if granting his wish.

He wondered if that time was more painful, or this time. Did he look pathetic? Crouching in place, he thought. Was what he was doing ridiculous? Would it be better for him to hurry and go away, so that he could at least keep his pride?

He looked up again. Arita's room, which had been dark just moments before, had lighted up. When did he come back/ Hirose hurriedly ran towards the intercom. But...

He knew the room number. He rang it just now. But now his initial resolution faded, and his weak-hearted self hesitated in calling him out.

Should he just go back? He would be an idiot to come all this way and return without accomplishing anything. And even if he did go back, nothing will be solved.

The automatic door opened, and a person came out. He thought he'd bump into him, so Hirose hurriedly pressed his body against the wall. The person passed him by, but looked back as if recognizing him. He cocked his head, and his eyes widened with shock.

What? Hirose?

He couldn't even answer him. Arita was comfortably dressed in T-shirt and jeans. His mouth wide open, he looked Hirose up and down, from top of his head to bottom of his feet.

“What happened? What are you doing here? Did something happen over there?”

He couldn't tell him that I wanted to see you, so I borrowed money and ran all the way here on a *shinkansen*.

“Yes...”

Arita continuously cocked his head.

“You really must have been in a rush. Asahina branch didn't get any kind of notification that someone was coming. Well, I guess you couldn't help it, what with up-coming event. So are you done with work?”

“Yes”

“Do you have a place to go?”

Hirose lowered his head for the first time.

“...I'm so sorry for asking so much from you. But could you let me stay over for one night?”

Arita pressed his chin, as if thinking. He didn't answer him right away.

“The last car had already left... I guess there's no helping it. If I knew in advance that you were coming, I would've tidied up my room a bit. Well, even if it's messy, if you're okay with it.”

“I'm sorry for troubling you.”

He followed Arita inside, who had unlocked the automatic lock. He suddenly realized.

“Mr. Arita, didn't you have something to do outside?”

“Oh, I was going to buy some cigarettes, but never mind now.”

“I'll wait, so go ahead. Or should I get some for you?”

“It's okay, I'll just forget about it today. You don't smoke.”

Arita lightly answered him. It felt weird. How did Arita know that he didn't smoke? He didn't recall ever telling him about it. He must have thought that because they had spent so much time together and Hirose had never smoked during that time. But it took Hirose a really long time to reach that answer.

Chapter 8

Arita's room that he saw for the first time was a lot more cluttered than he had imagined.

“I'll tell you in advance. My room is pretty messy.”

Arita reminded Hirose one more time before he came into the room. And when he entered Arita's room, it didn't seem messy, but he couldn't say it was a simplistic room, either.

“I don't really throw things out.”

At Hirose's interested gaze, Arita muttered, as if making excuses.

When Hirose said that he did not have dinner yet, Arita dug in this refrigerator and made him fried rice with remaining ingredients that he found.

When Hirose started to eat, Arita turned on the TV right away. He concentrated on the program, so Hirose had no opportunity to speak to him.

“You can bath first.”

When Arita came back, he gave bath towel and pajamas to Hirose.

Before Hirose could say a word, he was shoved inside the bathroom. When he finished bathing and came back out, the livingroom's sofa-bed was already transformed into a bed.

“You can sleep on my bed.”

“I'm fine with this.”

He couldn't kick the owner out of his own bed, so when he said that, Arita grinned.

“I'd love to do that, too, but your feet will stick out if you sleep here. Last time, when I slept here, it was pretty close for my feet, too. You're taller than I am, so.”

So saying, he was shoved inside the bedroom. He was chased away to the bed, and even the lights were turned off, so he lay down like a child.

But he was lying on bed where Arita's scent lingered. There was no way he could go “Good night” and fall asleep right away. He was strangely anxious, so he didn't want to sleep at all. Besides, he couldn't say anything thus far. He couldn't even ask him the questions that he had. He tried to convince himself that he could talk to him tomorrow morning, but he felt in such a rush that he couldn't help himself.

In the end, less than 10 minutes after he went to bed, he got up because he was thirsty. He took one step forward, but he crashed his left foot against the side table.

At the fuzzy view, he hurriedly pressed the bridge of his nose, but he couldn't feel the object that was always there. He forgot where he put his glasses. He went back to the livingroom, but he couldn't find it. The place with highest possibility that he lost it at was on top of dressing room's sink, but when he thought that Arita was bathing, he couldn't go and get them.

He changed his mind, thinking that he could just grab his glasses and come out right away. Hirose softly opened the dressing room's door. He could hear the showers running inside the bathroom.

As he thought, the glasses were on top of the sink. The lens fogged up a bit because of the moisture. He wiped the lens with ends of his fingers and wore his glasses. When he did, the blurred silhouette got a clear shape. He could clearly see showering Arita's silhouette beyond the fogged up glass.

He had to hurry and get out of here. His head ordered that, but his feet refused to move. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the shadow that moved slightly back and fro. Even when the shower's sounds got cut off, Hirose couldn't move. The door opened and Arita came out, his head down and his hair wet. He noticed the shadow in front of him and swallowed his breath.

Arita hurriedly started to run back inside the bath, and Hirose grabbed his arm without thinking.

“I'm sorry. I just came to get my glasses.”

Pulling Arita towards him, he hurriedly gave him the bath towel in front of him. Arita quickly wrapped it around his waist. He was so startled that his shaking fingers couldn't properly wrap the bath towel around his waist. Arita was having trouble doing something so simple.

Arita deeply sighed, fingering the exposed area of his neck that he could see between his wet hair.

“Won't you leave. I'd like to get dressed.”

“Yes.”

But his feet wouldn't move. Like an idiot, he was frozen into place.

“Mr. Arita, I have something I'd like to talk to you about.”

“You don't have to discuss it here, do you. Get out for now.”

His tone of voice was cold, refusing. When Hirose didn't make motions to step out, Arita grabbed his change of cloths and started to leave. Hirose, startled, grabbed the wet arm where droplets of water still fell.

“Let me go... You...”

Arita's arm strongly tried to shake him off right away. Hirose grabbed with ends of his fingers with all his strength.

“I love you.”

No matter how he decorated his words, in the end, that was the conclusion. No matter how much he tried to show his true feelings, in the end it only came down to this. Half-naked Arita was nailed into place and couldn't move.

Hirose lowered his head. He was scared about how he seemed to Arita. What if Arita looked at him with disgusted expression? Could he just run away.

“I... am sorry, in a place like this”

He finally realized that he was being ridiculous and released Arita's arm. His lowered gaze could see Arita's right arm. Near his wrist, there was red finger mark left. Mark that Hirose left after grabbing him. The left hand slowly came near him, and then moved up.

Thinking that he'll hit him, he closed his eyes, but his hair was strongly pulled instead. Startled, Hirose opened his eyes.

“Ouch!”

He raised his face. Even if he didn't want to, his eyes crashed against Arita's. Arita's expression that he had been terrified of was a strange one that Hirose had never seen before.

He was neither mad, nor amused, nor sad. It was an uncertain expression. His hair that was violently grabbed was throbbing with pain. Arita closed his eyes tightly, and then suddenly pulled his face forward.

Their lips touched. It crashed, and then as if longing for him, his inner mouth was touched with his tongue, so he was shocked. The man started to lean his entire body against him. He couldn't support all that weight, so Hirose leaned against the sink and sat down as if sliding down. The kiss wouldn't end. Like last time, Arita lunged at Hirose, as if he was taken over by someone else.

The bath towel wrapped around his waist got loose, and fell to the floor. As if forgetting that he was naked, Arita seemed to be concentrating on kissing Hirose.

It was a horribly violent kiss. Arita seemed to be starving for his kiss. Hirose grabbed both of his shoulders and pulled him away. Arita who was completely drunk had his lips wet with saliva, and the faint light of dressing room was making it shine.

“Mr... Arita?”

It was moment when he woke up from the dream. Arita's shaking head suddenly stopped, and stared at Hirose's face. His sight darkened. Arita's hands covered Hirose's field of view.

“Just kidding.”

Top of his belly suddenly lightened. He could see again.

“Kidding. I just wanted to mess around with you a bit.”

Arita stood up and grabbing the bath towel, wrapped it around his waist. Stepping over Hirose, he left. Hirose spent few moments just sitting there, spacing out. But he slowly stood up.

Arita had changed into pajamas and sitting on the living room couch, he was cutting his toe nails. Pressing the nail clipper against his right foot's middle toe, he cut. It made clipping noises.

“Mr. Arita.”

“Hurry and go to bed.”

He answered, refusing to look at Hirose. Meanwhile, he continued cutting his toe nails.

“Just now...”

“I told you, I was just joking. Man, you're persistent.”

Finishing with his right foot, Arita curled his left foot on top of the couch.

The passionate kiss, the arms that clung to him like he was someone else... was all a joke? That wasn't done because he was drunk. Nor it was because he confused him with his lover.

“Ouch!”

Arita dropped the nail clippers. Between the deeply cut toe nail, red started to spread right away. Clucking his tongue, Arita looked around himself.

“Could you pass me some tissue over there?”

Arita held out his right hand, but Hirose knelt in front of Arita's foot instead of handing him over the piece of tissue. When he pressed down on the left foot with his right hand, Arita hesitated and pulled in his waist.

While pressing down on the bloodied end of toe, he glanced at the red color. The blood was threatening to overflow, so he licked the ends of his toe with his tongue. The licked area became clean, but the blood sipped out again. Hirose cleaned him, over and over.

When he realized that he was doing something completely abnormal, the blood had nearly stopped. Holding Arita's left foot, he lifted his head. Arita had his head lowered, not moving.

“Mr... Arita?”

Arita slowly raised his head. He gave him a tired smile.

“How do I look to you?”

“What do you mean by how...?”

“Do I look like I love you? Does my face say that I love you so much that I can't help myself?”

It was a strange question. Even if he asked that, Hirose wouldn't know something like that.

“I wouldn't know.”

He answered him honestly. But, he came all the way here because that's what he wanted to know.

“I'm not sure, either. Am I thinking of you only as a friend, or am I in love with you? I'm hoping it's the former.”

Arita grabbed his head.

“I became weird. You can tell, too, right? It's strange. I'm doing something ridiculous and stuff. I wasn't that drunk, either.”

His heart started to beat faster. Thump, thump, it was beating few times faster than normal. When Hirose strongly grabbed his left foot, Arita suddenly lifted his head.

“Mr. Arita... Was there times that you wanted to talk to me?”

“Yeah.”

He uncertainly muttered his answer.

“How about when you wanted to see me.”

“That happened, too.”

“How about times you wanted to touch me.”

He questioned, as if interrogating him. Arita bitterly smiled.

“You're mean.”

“I didn't mean to...”

“Do you think I did all those ridiculous things without even worrying about it first?”

“... I'm like that, too. I'm same as Mr. Arita. So...”

“Are you trying to say that I love you, too?”

Arita answered, dropping his head.

The couch was definitely too small for Hirose. Whenever his feet hung over the arm rest, Hirose had to bend his knees.

They've kissed for a long time. The kiss was trembling softly, like ocean waves. The kiss was gentle like falling asleep.

It was embarrassing, but they had already gotten undressed. They held each other, bare skinned,

and Hirose was shocked at the body's heat.

They were touching against each other. He couldn't stand still, like last time Arita had touched him. Arita was touching him, knowing full well that it was him. Now he knew. This time, he wasn't deceiving him.

That area was touched with stomach, and fondled until it became hard. It gave him a strange sense of pleasure. Even though it became dirty, even though it became messy and wet, they didn't care at all.

They couldn't even spare time to go to the bed, so they tangled into each other on top of the narrow sofa, both on top and the bottom. They touched every area of their skin, and licked every where.

You couldn't tell who had initiated the kiss, and it became strange but they just laughed it off. It was lustful behavior, something that couldn't be described as clean. But even so, he thought that it was amazing.

Arita couldn't breath probably, and he was panting. He looked so lustful that it became scary, but he still became stirred up. He suddenly thought that he wanted to embrace him. He thought he wanted to hold Arita, like holding a woman.

When Arita was pushed underneath him, he opened both arms and touched the inner area. Arita's back startled. He hadn't refused so far, no matter what he did to him, but for the first time, he twisted his waist away, as if troubled.

“Mr. Arita.”

When he called out his name, his confused gaze shook.

“... Um... You know, er...”

“What is it?”

“No... That's”

Arita started to say something, but he gave him. And then he tightened his hold on Hirose's neck, hugging him closer.

Taking that as the sign, Hirose pushed his violently changed self inside of Arita.

“Ah”

Only the tip went in a little, but Arita moaned. Confused, he tried to pull out, but he tightened up so much that he couldn't. As if noticing Hirose's attempt, Arita breathed out painfully and whispered,

“I'm okay, I'm okay, so...”

“I'm sorry.”

Lead on by his voice, he slowly pushed in his waist. Every time, he could hear unclear scream. Taking time, he pushed in until he reached the deepest area.

“I'll finish soon. Please bear with me a bit.”

Kissing Arita, who had wrinkled his face with pain, he started to shake his waist. Every time, Arita would give a small scream. Hearing it was painful, so as if stopping him, Hirose kissed Arita again and again.

But as he was drowning into the sensation, Arita's hurt voice just became a factor to make him more aroused. Trying to calm Arita, who was hurting, he shook his waist. He couldn't hurry and finish as he had initially promised.

Hirose was in an euphoria, so he didn't learn until later what Arita had wanted to say at this time.

The act of penetration between two men must have been really harsh on Arita's body. The next day, Arita couldn't straighten his waist. He frowned just by sitting up. Hirose hugged him as they showered together.

Arita seemed to be hurting, but Hirose felt like he was dreaming, since he was so happy. Everything made him happy when he thought that it was for Arita -- holding him on his lap as he carefully washed his hair and body, dressing him, preparing meals for him.

He could kiss him whenever he wanted to. He could stare at him as much as he'd like, whenever he wanted to see him. He didn't get yelled at. Arita couldn't even sit, so he spent the day, lying on the bed. Hirose didn't want to be apart from him even for a second. So he stayed on top of the bed, too, clinging next to Arita the entire day.

I've been thinking about you ever since you were called away, Arita said. There are several co-workers who worked with me when I had been working at the main office, so they were giving me your news.

“You were really cold.”

Arita complained, saying that he hadn't called him for over a month after he had left. At the ticklish sweetness, Hirose felt like his body would melt away from inside out.

“We talked on the phone just once, but you didn't contact me again after that. I kept waiting, but I couldn't wait any more, so I went on a business trip to your place. But you wouldn't give me your body, either.”

“You said you confused me with your lover.”

When he mentioned that on purpose, Arita looked annoyed as he denied.

“I seduced you on purpose. I thought you'd go for it, but not at all. The next day, you acted like nothing happened, so it made me feel pathetic. I thought maybe I'm the only one who wanted to make love, so I felt depressed. I knew you'd called me, but I couldn't handle listening to your voice, either, so I couldn't call you back.”

Arita looked troubled, but he told him in detail.

“But I didn't want our relationship to not develop at all from that point, so I brought up all my courage and went on the business trip to your place even though I didn't have to. But the first thing I saw when I met you was "that." I felt like my confused eyes suddenly became clear. Of course, I never even considered that you might have a woman who liked you. I thought you couldn't date normally because I didn't accept you. So I couldn't bring myself to ask you out.”

His story was that he had lied about having a girlfriend so that he could push him away. When he finished confessing everything, Arita seemed to feel relieved. Yawning widely, he rubbed his eyes.

“Maybe it's because I couldn't sleep probably yesterday. Even though it's the middle of morning, I feel so sleepy.”

When Arita yawned and closed his eyes, he went closer to him and kissed him. His eyes opened a little. Before he fell asleep, there was one thing that he wanted to hear no matter what, even if just once.

“Staring from when...”

Arita tilted his head.

“Started from when did you started to like me?”

“We~ll”

Arita suddenly turned to the side. He wanted to hear his answer no matter what, so he embraced him close. In his arms, Arita chuckled.

“I'm not a brick like you, so it definitely didn't take 5-6 years.”

He suddenly bit his arm, so he was startled. Arita left a small teethmark on his arm, and glanced up at Hirose.

“You know, I was going to hold you.”

“What?!”

“I'm a man, too, so it's not strange. I didn't even think about being embraced. Last time when I seduced you, you didn't seem to like it, so I was trying to be gentle. And then we suddenly got into that position. Well, it's fine anyway.”

Hearing that, Hirose became anxious. He didn't even consider that. He thought it was a matter of course, but thinking about it, Arita was a man, too. No matter how much he liked him, he must have felt certain repulse against doing something like that.

Could he be more confident since he suppressed such repulse, and allowed him his body? When he kissed the sleepy lips, Arita seemed a little annoyed, but lightly answered with end of his tongue.

He spent the weekend at his apartment, and he returned to the main company reluctantly. A month quickly passed by. Nothing happened at the main company, but one thing that changed was that Kawakami's stubbornness and effort finally paid off, since he became an official couple with Isogai.

He promised with Arita to meet at least once a month. Sometimes Hirose returned, and sometimes Arita came out. Afterwards, they talked over the phone. His phone bill and transportation bill started to increase. Arita, who became that much closer, felt further apart because of that, so he wanted to return to Asahina as soon as possible.

Recently, Hirose changed his subject of photography. When he told Arita that he wanted to take shots of his nude, Arita didn't seem to dislike it that much. Hirose felt like he finally understood his friend's feelings when they were students, who only took pictures of naked women.

He showed the photos he printed out to Arita, but he got mad, saying,

“Are you going to show this to other people?”

No matter how many times he told him that it was art, he wouldn't listen.

“If it's explicit like this, isn't it illegal?”

“Really? I thought you looked gorgeous.”

At those words, Arita became bright red and couldn't say anything.

When Hirose mentioned that someday, he wanted to introduce him to his parents, it had been about three months after the first night they'd spent together. It was towards end of October, and Hirose had returned to Asahina, using the 3-day weekend.

They had one day left of the weekend, and they were talking about driving to few places while they were cuddling in bed.

Until then, Arita was answering his sweet kisses, but he suddenly closed his lips. As if ignoring him,

he turned his back on Hirose.

“Mr. Arita.”

But he could run away only so much when he was in his arms. Hirose clung close to Arita, hugging him tightly as if pressing him for an answer.

“You'll certainly get kicked out of your family.”

His voice was unusually stern.

“It doesn't matter. I have lots of siblings, so one of us not getting married wouldn't be a big deal. But Mr. Arita, you...”

“Lot of people will get hurt. So it's better if we just stay quiet.”

“You think so?”

Arita looked back, and dropped a deep kiss on Hirose as if sucking him in. And then he tightly hugged him.

“I can't tell anyone about you. I can't introduce you to my parents, nor my friends.”

He gently patted his cheek. As if reading his mind, Arita quietly looked into Hirose's eyes.

“Do you think I'm cruel?”

“It's fine if you don't want to tell anyone, Mr. Arita.”

Arita's eyes became teared up, as if he would burst into tears any second. He lightly closed his eyes.

“I have one little brother, but he ran away with a man two years ago. There was a huge uproar because of him. So...”

“Mr. Arita...”

“Everyone became hurt because of my brother. That's fine now. It's in the past. But my parents are placing their hopes on me. They're asking to see their grandchildren's face soon... So I can't tell them that I fell in love with a man, too. There's nothing I could do about their grandchildren that will never be born. But I can't tell them that, even if I die.”

His shoulders became wet. He thought that he was crying.

“I thought I should never fall in love with a man. I thought I'd be okay... But I became dragged into you, and my heart dropped away, like sinking into an endless swamp... I forgot all about my brother, and my parents, and totally fell for you...”

He slapped his back. Hard.

“No matter how familiar you got with me, you shouldn't have felt sorry for me. You should've just left me alone. Then I wouldn't had to cry because of this.”

He thought Arita completely came into his arms. But from his “circumstances” that he couldn't even imagine, Hirose felt his throat clogging up, and he couldn't breath.

He held him tightly. He strongly hugged him, until he compressed his lungs. Arita threw a fit, saying that he was hurting him. When he finally loosened his hold, Arita breathed in deeply, and grabbed Hirose's hair so hard that he teared.

“You dummy, are you trying to kill me?!?”

He held Arita's cheeks in his hands and kissed him. The violent right hand that was pulling at Hirose's hair softly fell on top of the sheet.

“... If you can't do that, break up with me while smiling.”

Opposite to his words, Arita clung to him.

“You're the only one for me.”

Gently brushing his hair back, he whispered. From now on, and beyond that, Arita was the only person he ever needed. He loved this person who was sweet, and took care of him gently. He loved this man who said it was painful for him, but still said that he loved him while crying. He didn't need anyone else.

While holding him, Arita fell asleep. He kissed his red-eyed lover. Hirose quietly gazed at his sleeping face. He kept watching him tiredlessly.